Verdun

France

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Verdun, town, Meuse *département*, Grand Est *région*, northeastern France, on the Meuse River. Most of the town is on the left bank, near the Citadel. Practically destroyed in World

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rising on the highest point of the town, has been restored.

Verdun was a Gallic fortress before Roman times. It was there in 843 that three grandsons of Charlemagne divided his empire in the Treaty of Verdun. Conquered by German invaders in the 10th century, it was later linked with Metz and Toul to form the Trois-Évêchés (Three Bishoprics) territory. In 1552 the French king Henry II took over the three bishoprics, and France's ownership was confirmed in 1648 by the Peace of Westphalia. In 1792 Verdun was besieged by the Prussians and yielded only a few weeks before the French victory at Valmy. The Prussians captured it again in 1870 and held it until 1873. After France lost Alsace-Lorraine to the German Empire in 1871, the French-German frontier was fixed barely 30 miles (50 km) away from Verdun. In response, France heavily fortified the hills around the town to counterbalance the German stronghold of Metz.

In World War I this "great advanced citadel of France" became, in Winston Churchill's phrase, "the anvil upon which French manhood was to be hammered to death." The ring of fortresses around Verdun, forming one of the main barriers on the road to Paris from the east, was the primary objective of the great German offensive of 1916. The long battle fought in the surrounding countryside is commemorated by numerous monuments, of which the most remarkable are the Ossuaire de Douaumont and the Monument de la Victoire. There are more than 70 cemeteries (Allied and German) in the area, and war museums are in the Citadel and in the restored 17th-century Hôtel de Ville. The Verdun battlefields are still much visited. During World War II in September 1944 the town was heavily bombed by the Germans after its liberation by U.S. forces.

Verdun, France French troops passing though the ruins of Verdun, France, 1916.

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Guess the City by Its River Quiz

Today Verdun is an administrative and commercial centre that serves a largely rural region. Industrial development has been limited but includes food processing, printing, and the manufacture of electronics. Pop. (1999) 19,624; (2014 est.) 18,393.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

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Ask Anything Quick Summary

World War I

1914–1918

Also known as: First World War, Great War, WWI

Dennis E. Showalter • All Britannica Editors July 21, 2026 • History

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Ask Anything | Quick Summary

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World War I A British soldier inside a trench on the Western Front during World War I, 1914–18.

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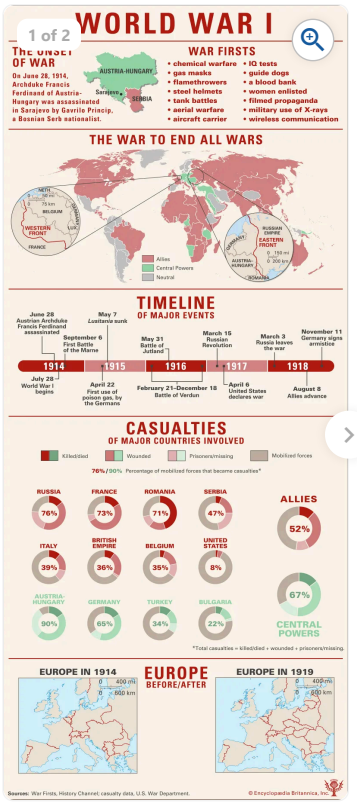
World War I, an international conflict that in 1914–18 embroiled most of the nations of Europe along with Russia, the United States, the Middle East, and other regions. The war pitted the Central Powers—mainly Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey—against the Allies—mainly France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and, from 1917, the United States. It ended with the defeat of the Central Powers. The war was virtually unprecedented in the slaughter, carnage, and destruction it caused.

World War I was one of the great watersheds of 20th-century geopolitical history. It led to the fall of four great imperial dynasties (in Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey), resulted in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and, in its destabilization of European society, laid the groundwork for World War II.



World War I A collection of significant facts about World War I.

The outbreak of war

With Serbia already much aggrandized by the two Balkan Wars (1912–13, 1913), Serbian nationalists turned their attention back to the idea of “liberating” the South Slavs of Austria-Hungary. Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević, head of Serbia’s military intelligence, was also, under the alias “Apis,” head of the secret society Union or Death, pledged to the pursuit of this pan-Serbian ambition. Believing that the Serbs’ cause would be served by the death of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph, and learning that the Archduke was about to visit Bosnia on a tour of military inspection, Apis plotted his assassination. Nikola Pašić, the Serbian prime minister and an enemy of Apis, heard of the plot and warned the Austrian government of it, but his message was too cautiously worded to be understood.

At 11:15 AM on June 28, 1914, in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, Franz Ferdinand and his morganatic wife, Sophie, duchess of Hohenberg, were shot dead by a Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip. The chief of the Austro-Hungarian general staff, Franz, Graf (count) Conrad von Hötzendorf, and the foreign minister, Leopold, Graf von Berchtold, saw the crime as the occasion for measures to humiliate Serbia and so to enhance Austria-Hungary’s prestige in the Balkans. Conrad had already (October 1913) been assured by William II of Germany’s support if Austria-Hungary should start a preventive war against Serbia. This assurance was confirmed in the week following the assassination, before William, on July 6, set off upon his annual cruise to the North Cape, off Norway.

The Austrians decided to present an unacceptable ultimatum to Serbia and then to declare war, relying on Germany to deter Russia from intervention. Though the terms of the ultimatum were finally approved on July 19, its delivery was postponed to the evening of July 23, since by that time the French president, Raymond Poincaré, and his premier, René Viviani, who had set off on a state visit to Russia on July 15, would be on their way home and therefore unable to concert an immediate reaction with their Russian allies. When the delivery was announced, on July 24, Russia declared that Austria-Hungary must not be allowed to crush Serbia.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, duchess of Hohenberg Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wi...(more)

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Pick Your Battles Quiz

Serbia replied to the ultimatum on July 25, accepting most of its demands but protesting against two of them—namely, that Serbian officials (unnamed) should be dismissed at Austria-Hungary's behest and that Austro-Hungarian officials should take part, on Serbian soil, in proceedings against organizations hostile to Austria-Hungary. Though Serbia offered to submit the issue to international arbitration, Austria-Hungary promptly severed diplomatic relations and ordered partial mobilization.

Home from his cruise on July 27, William learned on July 28 how Serbia had replied to the ultimatum. At once he instructed the German Foreign Office to tell Austria-Hungary that there was no longer any justification for war and that it should content itself with a temporary occupation of Belgrade. But, meanwhile, the German Foreign Office had been giving such encouragement to Berchtold that already on July 27 he had persuaded Franz Joseph to authorize war against Serbia. War was in fact declared on July 28, and Austro-Hungarian artillery began to bombard Belgrade the next day. Russia then ordered partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary, and on July 30, when Austria-Hungary was riposting conventionally with an order of mobilization on its Russian frontier, Russia ordered general mobilization. Germany, which since July 28 had still been hoping, in disregard of earlier warning hints from Great Britain, that Austria-Hungary's war against Serbia could be "localized" to the Balkans, was now disillusioned insofar as eastern Europe was concerned. On July 31 Germany sent a 24-hour ultimatum requiring Russia to halt its mobilization and an 18-hour ultimatum requiring France to promise neutrality in the event of war between Russia and Germany.

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Both Russia and France predictably ignored these demands. On August 1 Germany ordered general mobilization and declared war against Russia, and France likewise ordered general mobilization. The next day Germany sent troops into Luxembourg and demanded from Belgium free passage for German troops across its neutral territory. On August 3 Germany declared war against France.

In the night of August 3–4 German forces invaded Belgium. Thereupon, Great Britain, which had no concern with Serbia and no express obligation to fight either for Russia or for France but was expressly committed to defend Belgium, on August 4 declared war against Germany.

Austria-Hungary declared war against Russia on August 5; Serbia against Germany on August 6; Montenegro against Austria-Hungary on August 7 and against Germany on August 12; France and Great Britain against Austria-Hungary on August 10 and on August 12, respectively; Japan against Germany on August 23; Austria-Hungary against Japan on August 25 and against Belgium on August 28.

Romania had renewed its secret anti-Russian alliance of 1883 with the Central Powers on February 26, 1914, but now chose to remain neutral. Italy had confirmed the Triple Alliance on December 7, 1912, but could now propound formal arguments for disregarding it: first, Italy was not obliged to support its allies in a war of aggression; second, the original treaty of 1882 had stated expressly that the alliance was not against England.

On September 5, 1914, Russia, France, and Great Britain concluded the Treaty of London, each promising not to make a separate peace with the Central Powers. Thenceforth, they could be called the Allied, or Entente, powers, or simply the Allies.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 was generally greeted with confidence and jubilation by the peoples of Europe, among whom it inspired a wave of patriotic feeling and celebration. Few people imagined how long or how disastrous a war between the great nations of Europe could be, and most believed that their country's side would be victorious within a matter of months. The war was welcomed either patriotically, as a defensive one imposed by national necessity, or idealistically, as one for upholding right against might, the sanctity of treaties, and international morality.

Causes and start of World War I Overview of the start of World War I, including details of the June 28, 1914, assassination of...(more)

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Forces and resources of the combatant nations in 1914

When war broke out, the Allied powers possessed greater overall demographic, industrial, and military resources than the Central Powers and enjoyed easier access to the oceans for trade with neutral countries, particularly with the United States.

The table shows the population, steel production, and armed strengths of the two rival coalitions in 1914.

Strength of the belligerents, Aug. 4, 1914

resources	Central Powers	Allied Powers
population (in millions)	115.2	265.5
steel production (in millions of metric tons)	17.0	15.3
army divisions available for mobilization	146	212
modern battleships	20	39

All the initial belligerents in World War I were self-sufficient in food except Great Britain and Germany. Great Britain's industrial establishment was slightly superior to Germany's (17 percent of world trade in 1913 as compared with 12 percent for Germany), but Germany's diversified chemical industry facilitated the production of ersatz, or substitute, materials, which compensated for the worst shortages ensuing from the British wartime blockade. The German chemist Fritz Haber was already developing a process for the fixation of nitrogen from air; this process made Germany self-sufficient in explosives and thus no longer dependent on imports of nitrates from Chile.

Of all the initial belligerent nations, only Great Britain had a volunteer army, and this was quite small at the start of the war. The other nations had much larger conscript armies that required three to four years of service from able-bodied males of military age, to be followed by several years in reserve formations. Military strength on land was counted in terms of divisions composed of 12,000–20,000 officers and men. Two or more divisions made up an army corps, and two or more corps made up an army. An army could thus comprise anywhere from 50,000 to 250,000 men.

The land forces of the belligerent nations at the outbreak of war in August 1914 are shown in the table.

WORLD WAR I EVENTS

Eastern Front
1914 - 1918

Battle of the Fr...
August 4, 1914 - September 6, 1914

Battle of Morha...
August 20, 1914 - August 22, 1914

Battle of Mons
August 23, 1914

Battle of Tanne...
August 26, 1914 - August 30, 1914

First Battle of th...
September 6, 1914 - September 12, 1914

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Land forces of the belligerents, Aug. 4, 1914

	country	regular divisions (with number of field armies)	other land forces	total manpower
Central Powers	Germany	98 (8)	27 Landwehr brigades	1,900,000
	Austria-Hungary	48 (6)		450,000
Allied Powers	Russia	102 (6)		1,400,000
	France	72 (5)		1,290,000
	Serbia	11 (3)		190,000
	Belgium	7 (1)	69,000 fortress troops	186,000
	Great Britain	6 (1)	14 territorial divisions*	120,000

*Restricted in 1914 to service at home.

The higher state of discipline, training, leadership, and armament of the German army reduced the importance of the initial numerical inferiority of the armies of the Central Powers. Because of the comparative slowness of mobilization, poor higher leadership, and lower scale of armament of the Russian armies, there was an approximate balance of forces between the Central Powers and the Allies in August 1914 that prevented either side from gaining a quick victory.

Germany and Austria also enjoyed the advantage of “interior lines of communication,” which enabled them to send their forces to critical points on the battlefronts by the shortest route. According to one estimate, Germany’s railway network made it possible to move eight divisions simultaneously from the Western Front to the Eastern Front in four and a half days.

Even greater in importance was the advantage that Germany derived from its strong military traditions and its cadre of highly efficient and disciplined regular officers. Skilled in directing a war of movement and quick to exploit the advantages of flank attacks, German senior officers were to prove generally more capable than their Allied counterparts at directing the operations of large troop formations.

Sea power was largely reckoned in terms of capital ships, or dreadnought battleships and battle cruisers having extremely large guns. Despite intensive competition from the Germans, the British had maintained their superiority in numbers, with the result that, in capital ships, the Allies had an almost two-to-one advantage over the Central Powers.

The strength of the two principal rivals at sea, Great Britain and Germany, is compared in the table.

British and German naval strength, August 1914		
type	British	German
dreadnought battleships	20	14
battle cruisers	9	4
pre-dreadnought battleships	39	22
armoured cruisers	34	9
cruisers	64	41
destroyers	301*	144
submarines	65	28
*Including Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand destroyers of all classes.		

The numerical superiority of the British navy, however, was offset by the technological lead of the German navy in many categories, such as range-finding equipment, magazine protection, searchlights, torpedoes, and mines. Great Britain relied on the Royal Navy not only to ensure necessary imports of food and other supplies in wartime but also to sever the Central Powers' access to the markets of the world. With superior numbers of warships, Great Britain could impose a blockade that gradually weakened Germany by preventing imports from overseas.

Technology of war in 1914

The planning and conduct of war in 1914 were crucially influenced by the invention of new weapons and the improvement of existing types since the Franco-German War of 1870–71. The chief developments of the intervening period had been the machine gun and the rapid-fire field artillery gun. The modern machine gun, which had been developed in the 1880s and '90s, was a reliable belt-fed gun capable of sustained rates of extremely rapid fire; it could fire 600 bullets per minute with a range of more than 1,000 yards (900 metres). In the realm of field artillery, the period leading up to the war saw the introduction of improved breech-loading mechanisms and brakes. Without a brake or recoil mechanism, a gun lurched out of position during firing and had to be re-aimed after each round. The new improvements were epitomized in the French 75-millimetre field gun; it remained motionless during firing, and it was not necessary to readjust the aim in order to bring sustained fire on a target.

Maxim machine gun German infantrymen operating a Maxim machine gun during World War I.

Machine guns and rapid-firing artillery, when used in combination with trenches and barbed-wire emplacements, gave a decided advantage to the defense, since these weapons' rapid and sustained firepower could decimate a frontal assault by either infantry or cavalry.

There was a considerable disparity in 1914 between the deadly effectiveness of modern armaments and the doctrinal teachings of some armies. The South African War and the Russo-Japanese War had revealed the futility of frontal infantry or cavalry attacks on prepared positions when unaccompanied by surprise, but few military leaders foresaw that the machine gun and the rapid-firing field gun would force armies into trenches in order to survive. Instead, war was looked upon by many leaders in 1914 as a contest of national wills, spirit, and courage. A prime example of this attitude was the French army, which was dominated by the doctrine of the offensive. French military doctrine called for headlong bayonet charges of French infantrymen against the German rifles, machine guns, and artillery. German military thinking, under the influence of Alfred, Graf von Schlieffen, sought, unlike the French, to avoid frontal assaults but rather to achieve an early decision by deep flanking attacks; and at the same time to make use of reserve divisions alongside

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regular formations from the outset of war. The Germans paid greater attention to training their officers in defensive tactics using machine guns, barbed wire, and fortifications.

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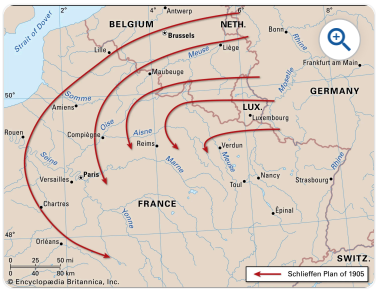
The initial stages of the war

Initial strategies

The Schlieffen Plan



Schlieffen Plan of 1905

Years before 1914, successive chiefs of the German general staff had been foreseeing Germany's having to fight a war on two fronts at the same time, against Russia in the east and France in the west, whose combined strength was numerically superior to the Central Powers'. The elder Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the German general staff from 1858 to 1888, decided that Germany should stay at first on the defensive in the west and deal a crippling blow to Russia's advanced forces before turning to counterattack the French advance. His immediate successor, Alfred von Waldersee, also believed in staying on the defensive in the west. Alfred, Graf von Schlieffen, who served as chief of the German general staff from 1891 to 1905, took a contrary view, and it was the plan he developed that was to guide Germany's initial wartime strategy. Schlieffen realized that on the outbreak of war Russia would need six full weeks to mobilize and assemble its vast armies, given the immense Russian countryside and population, the sparsity of the rail network, and the inefficiency of the government bureaucracy. Taking advantage of this fact, Schlieffen planned to initially adopt a purely defensive posture on the Eastern Front with a minimal number of troops facing Russia's slowly gathering armies. Germany would instead concentrate almost all of its troops in the west against France and would seek to bypass France's frontier fortifications by an offensive through neutral Belgium to the north. This offensive would sweep westward and then southward through the heart of northern France, capturing the capital and knocking that country out of the war within a few weeks. Having gained security in the west, Germany would then shift its troops to the east and destroy the Russian menace with a similar concentration of forces.

By the time of his retirement in 1905, Schlieffen had elaborated a plan for a great wheeling movement of the right (northern) wing of the German armies not only through central Belgium but also, in order to bypass the Belgian fortresses of Liège and Namur in the Meuse valley, through the southernmost part of the Netherlands. With their right wing entering France near Lille, the Germans would continue to wheel westward until they were near the English Channel; they would then turn southward so as to sever the French armies' line of retreat from France's eastern frontier to the south; and the outermost arc of the wheel would sweep southward west of Paris, in order to avoid exposing the German right flank to a counterstroke launched from the city's outskirts. If the Schlieffen Plan succeeded, Germany's armies would simultaneously encircle the French army from the north, overrun all of northeastern France, and capture Paris, thus forcing France into a humiliating surrender. The large wheeling movement that the plan envisaged required correspondingly large forces for its execution, in view of the need to keep up the numerical strength of the long-stretched marching line and the need to leave adequate detachments on guard over the Belgian fortresses that had been bypassed. Accordingly, Schlieffen allocated nearly seven-eighths of Germany's available troop strength to the execution of the wheeling movement by the right and centre wings, leaving only one-eighth to face a possible French offensive on Germany's western frontier. Thus, the maximum of strength was allocated to the wheel's edge—that is, to the right. Schlieffen's plan was observed by the younger Helmuth von Moltke, who became chief of the general staff in 1906. Moltke was still in office when war broke out in 1914.

Britannica Quiz

What Very Big Thing Happened on This Day?

Eastern Front strategy, 1914

Russian Poland, the westernmost part of the Russian Empire, was a thick tongue of land enclosed to the north by East Prussia, to the west by German Poland (Poznania) and by Silesia, and to the south by Austrian Poland (Galicia). It was thus obviously exposed to a two-pronged invasion by the Central Powers, but the Germans, apart from their grand strategy of crushing France before

attempting anything against Russia, took note of the poverty of Russian Poland's transportation network and so were disinclined to overrun that vulnerable area prematurely. Austria-Hungary, however, whose frontier with Russia lay much farther east than Germany's and who was moreover afraid of disaffection among the Slav minorities, urged some immediate action to forestall a Russian offensive. Moltke therefore agreed to the Austrian general staff's suggestion for a northeastward thrust by the Austrian army into Russian Poland—the more readily because it would occupy the Russians during the crisis in France.

The Russians, for their part, would have preferred to concentrate their immediately available forces against Austria and to leave Germany undisturbed until their mobilization should have been completed. The French were anxious to relieve the German pressure against themselves, however, and so they persuaded the Russians to undertake an offensive involving two armies against the Germans in East Prussia simultaneously with one involving four armies against the Austrians in Galicia. The Russian army, whose proverbial slowness and unwieldy organization dictated a cautious strategy, thus undertook an extra offensive against East Prussia that only an army of high mobility and tight organization could have hoped to execute successfully.

The strategy of the Western Allies, 1914

For some 30 years after 1870, considering the likelihood of another German war, the French high command had subscribed to the strategy of an initial defensive to be followed by a counterstroke against the expected invasion: a great system of fortresses was created on the frontier, but gaps were left in order to "canalize" the German attack. France's alliance with Russia and its entente with Great Britain, however, encouraged a reversal of plan, and after the turn of the century a new school of military thinkers began to argue for an offensive strategy. The advocates of the offensive *à l'outrance* ("to the utmost") gained control of the French military machine, and in 1911 a spokesman of this school, General J.-J.-C. Joffre, was designated chief of the general staff. He sponsored the notorious Plan XVII, with which France went to war in 1914.

Plan XVII gravely underestimated the strength that the Germans would deploy against France. Accepting the possibility that the Germans might employ their reserve troops along with regular troops at the outset, Plan XVII estimated the strength of the German army in the west at a possible maximum of 68 infantry divisions. The Germans actually deployed the equivalent of 83 $^{1}/_{2}$ divisions, counting *Landwehr* (reserve troops) and *Ersatz* (low-grade substitute troops) divisions, but French military opinion ignored or doubted this possibility; during the war's crucial opening days, when the rival armies were concentrating and moving forward, the French Intelligence counted only Germany's regular divisions in its estimates of the enemy strength. This was a serious miscalculation. Plan XVII also miscalculated the direction and scope of the coming onslaught: though it foresaw an invasion through Belgium, it assumed that the Germans would take the route through the Ardennes, thereby exposing their communications to attack. Basing itself on the idea of an immediate and general offensive, Plan XVII called for a French thrust toward the Saar into Lorraine by the 1st and 2nd armies, while on the French left (the north) the 3rd and 5th armies, facing Metz and the Ardennes, respectively, stood ready either to launch an offensive between Metz and Thionville or to strike from the north at the flank of any German drive through the Ardennes. When war broke out, it was taken for granted that the small British Expeditionary Force (BEF) under Sir John French should be used as an adjunct to France's forces, more or less as the French might see fit. It is clearly evident that the French were oblivious to the gigantic German offensive that was being aimed at their left (northern) wing.

The war in the west, 1914

The German invasion

For the smooth working of their plan for the invasion of France, the Germans had preliminarily to reduce the ring fortress of Liège, which commanded the route prescribed for their 1st and 2nd armies and which was the foremost stronghold of the Belgian defenses. German troops crossed the frontier into Belgium on the morning of August 4. Thanks to the resolution of a middle-aged staff officer, Erich Ludendorff, a German brigade occupied the town of Liège itself in the night of August 5–6 and the citadel on August 7, but the surrounding forts held out stubbornly until the Germans brought their heavy howitzers into action against them on August 12. These 420-millimetre siege guns proved too formidable for the forts, which one by one succumbed. The vanguard of the German invasion was already pressing the Belgian field army between the Gete River and Brussels, when the last of the Liège forts fell on August 16. The Belgians then withdrew northward to the entrenched

World War I; German sailors German sailors marching through the streets of Brussels, 1914.

camp of Antwerp. On August 20 the German 1st Army entered Brussels while the 2nd Army appeared before Namur, the one remaining fortress barring the Meuse route into France.

The initial clashes between the French and German armies along the Franco-German and Franco-Belgian frontiers are collectively known as the Battle of the Frontiers. This group of engagements, which lasted from August 14 until the beginning of the First Battle of the Marne on September 6, was to be the largest battle of the war and was perhaps the largest battle in human history up to that time, given the fact that a total of more than two million troops were involved.

The planned French thrust into Lorraine, totaling 19 divisions, started on August 14 but was shattered by the German 6th and 7th armies in the Battle of Morhange-Sarrebourg (August 20–22). Yet this abortive French offensive had an indirect effect on the German plan. For when the French attack in Lorraine developed, Moltke was tempted momentarily to postpone the right-wing sweep and instead to seek a victory in Lorraine. This fleeting impulse led him to divert to Lorraine the six newly formed *Ersatz* divisions that had been intended to increase the weight of his right wing. This was the first of several impromptu decisions by Moltke that were to fatally impair the execution of the Schlieffen Plan.

Meanwhile, the German imperial princes who commanded armies on the Germans' left (southern) wing in Lorraine were proving unwilling to forfeit their opportunity for personal glory. Crown Prince Rupert of Bavaria on August 20 ordered his 6th Army to counterattack instead of continuing to fall back before the French advance as planned, and Crown Prince William of Germany ordered his 5th Army to do the same. The strategic result of these unplanned German offensives was merely to throw the French back onto a fortified barrier that both restored and augmented their power of resistance. Thus, the French were soon afterward enabled to dispatch troops to reinforce their left flank—a redistribution of strength that was to have far-reaching results in the decisive Battle of the Marne.

Learn how the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance evolved into the Allies and Central Powers in World War I Euro...(more)

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While this seesaw campaign in Lorraine was taking place, more decisive events were occurring to the northwest. The German attack on Liège had awakened Joffre to the reality of a German advance through Belgium, but not to its strength or to the wideness of its sweep. In preparing a counterattack against the German advance through Belgium, Joffre envisaged a pincer movement, with the French 3rd and 4th armies on the right and the 5th, supported by the BEF, on the left, to trap the Germans in the Meuse–Ardennes area south of Liège. The fundamental flaw in this new French plan was that the Germans had deployed about 50 percent more troops than the French had estimated, and for a vaster enveloping movement. Consequently, while the right-hand claw of the French pincer (23 divisions) collided with the German 5th and 4th armies (20 divisions) in the Ardennes and was thrown back, the left-hand claw (13 French and four British divisions) found itself nearly trapped between the German 1st and 2nd armies, with a total of 30 divisions, on the one hand, and the 3rd, on the other. As the French 5th Army, under General Charles Lanrezac, was checked in its offensive south of the Sambre River by a German attack on August 21, the British, who reached Mons on August 22, at first agreed to stand there to cover Lanrezac's left; but on August 23 news of the fall of Namur and of the German 3rd Army's presence near Dinant induced Lanrezac to wisely order a general retreat; and on August 24 the British began their retreat from Mons, just in time to escape envelopment by the German 1st Army's westward march around their unprotected left flank.

At last Joffre realized the truth and the utter collapse of Plan XVII. Resolution was his greatest asset, and with imperturbable coolness he formed a new plan out of the wreckage. Joffre decided to swing the Allied centre and left back southwestward from the Belgian frontier to a line pivoted on the French fortress of Verdun and at the same time to withdraw some strength from the right wing so as to be able to station a newly created 6th Army on the extreme left, north of Paris. This plan might, in turn, have collapsed if the Germans had not themselves departed from Schlieffen's original plan due to a combination of Moltke's indecisiveness, poor communications between his headquarters and the field army commanders of the German right wing, and Moltke's resulting confusion about the developing tactical situation. In the first place, the German right wing was weakened by the subtraction of 11 divisions; four were detached to watch Antwerp and to invest French fortresses near the Belgian frontier, instead of using reserve and *Ersatz* troops for this as earlier intended, and seven more regular divisions were transferred to check the Russian advance into East Prussia (*see below*). In the second place, Alexander von Kluck, in command of the 1st Army, did in fact wheel inward north of Paris rather than southwest of the city.

Kluck's change of direction meant the inevitable abandonment of the original wide sweep around the far (western) side of Paris. Now the flank of this wheeling German line would pass the near side of Paris and across the face of the Paris defenses into the valley of the Marne River. The premature inward wheel of Kluck's 1st Army before Paris had been reached thus exposed the German extreme right wing to a flank attack and a possible counter-envelopment. On September 4 Moltke decided to abandon the original Schlieffen Plan and substituted a new one: the German 4th and 5th armies should drive southeastward from the Ardennes into French Lorraine west of Verdun and then converge with the southwestward advance of the 6th and 7th armies from Alsace against the Toul–Épinal line of fortifications, so as to envelop the whole French right wing; the 1st and 2nd armies, in the Marne valley, should stand guard, meanwhile, against any French countermove from the vicinity of Paris. But such an Allied countermove had already begun before the new German plan could be put into effect.

The First Battle of the Marne

Already on September 3, General J.-S. Gallieni, the military governor of Paris, had guessed the significance of the German 1st Army's swing inward to the Marne east of Paris. On September 4 Joffre, convinced by Gallieni's arguments, decisively ordered his whole left wing to turn about from their retreat and to begin a general offensive against the Germans' exposed right flank on September 6. The French 6th Army, under M.-J. Maunoury, forewarned by Gallieni, had actually begun attacking on September 5, and its pressure caused Kluck finally to engage the whole 1st Army in support of his right flank when he was still no farther up the Marne valley than Meaux, with nothing but a cavalry screen stretched across the 30 miles between him and Karl von Bülow's 2nd Army (at Montmirail). While the French 5th Army was turning to attack Bülow, the BEF (between the 5th and the 6th armies) was still continuing its retreat for another day, but on September 9 Bülow learned that the British too had turned and were advancing into the gap between him and Kluck. He therefore ordered the 2nd Army to retreat, thus obliging Kluck to do likewise with the 1st. The counterattack of the French 5th and 6th armies and the BEF developed into a general counterattack by the entire left and centre of the French army. This counterattack is known as the First Battle of the Marne. By September 11 the German retreat extended to all the German armies.

There were several reasons for this extraordinary turn of events. Chief among them was the utter exhaustion of the German soldiery of the right wing, some of whom had marched more than 150 miles (240 kilometres) under conditions of frequent battle. Their fatigue was ultimately a by-product of the Schlieffen Plan itself, for while the retreating French had been able to move troops by rail to various points within the circle formed by the front, the German troops had found their advance hampered by demolished bridges and destroyed rail lines. Their food and ammunition supply was consequently restricted, and the troops also had to make their advance by foot. Moreover, the Germans had underestimated the resilient spirit of the French troops, who had maintained their courage and morale and their confidence in their commanders. This fact was strikingly evidenced by the comparatively small number of prisoners taken by the Germans in the course of what was undeniably a precipitous French retreat.

Meanwhile, the assault by the German 6th and 7th armies on the defenses of the French eastern frontier had already proved a predictably expensive failure, and the German attempt at a partial envelopment pivoted on Verdun was abandoned. The German right wing withdrew northward from the Marne and made a firm stand along the Lower Aisne River and the Chemin des Dames ridge. Along the Aisne the preponderant power of the defense over the offense was reemphasized as the Germans repelled successive Allied attacks from the shelter of trenches. The First Battle of the Aisne marked the real beginning of trench warfare on the Western Front. Both sides were in the process of discovering that, in lieu of frontal assaults for which neither had the manpower readily available, the only alternative was to try to overlap and envelop the other's flank, in this case the one on the side pointing toward the North Sea and the English Channel. Thus began the "Race to the Sea," in which the developing trench networks of both sides were quickly extended northwestward until they reached the Atlantic at a point just inside coastal Belgium, west of Ostend.

The First Battle of the Marne succeeded in pushing the Germans back for a distance of 40 to 50 miles and thus saved the capital city of Paris from capture. In this respect it was a great strategic victory, since it enabled the French to renew their confidence and to continue the war. But the great German offensive, though unsuccessful in its object of knocking France out of the war, had enabled the Germans to capture a large portion of northeastern France. The loss of this heavily industrialized region, which contained much of the country's coal, iron, and steel production, was a serious blow to the continuation of the French war effort.

The Belgian army, meanwhile, had fallen back to the fortress city of Antwerp, which ended up behind the German lines. The Germans began a heavy bombardment of Antwerp on September 28, and Antwerp surrendered to the Germans on October 10.

After the failure of his first two attempts to turn the Germans' western flank (one on the Somme, the other near Arras), Joffre obstinately decided to try again yet farther north with the BEF—which in any case was being moved northward from the Aisne. The BEF, accordingly, was deployed between La Bassée and Ypres, while on the left the Belgians—who had wisely declined to participate in the projected attack—continued the front along the Yser down to the Channel. Erich von Falkenhayn, however, who on September 14 had succeeded Moltke as chief of the German general staff, had foreseen what was coming and had prepared a counterplan: one of his armies, transferred from Lorraine, was to check the expected offensive, while another was to sweep down the coast and crush the attackers' left flank. The British attack was launched from Ypres on October 19, the German thrust the next day. Though the Belgians of the Yser had been under increasing pressure for two days already, both Sir John French and Ferdinand Foch, Joffre's deputy in the north, were slow to appreciate what was happening to their "offensive," but in the night of October 29–30 the Belgians had to open the sluices on the Yser River to save themselves by flooding the Germans' path down the coast. The Battle of Ypres had its worst crises on October 31 and November 11 and did not die down into trench warfare until November 22.

By the end of 1914 the casualties the French had so far sustained in the war totaled about 380,000 killed and 600,000 wounded; the Germans had lost a slightly smaller number. With the repulse of the German attempt to break through at the Battle of Ypres, the strained and exhausted armies of both sides settled down into trench warfare. The trench barrier was consolidated from the Swiss frontier to the Atlantic; the power of modern defense had triumphed over the attack, and stalemate ensued. The military history of the Western Front during the next three years was to be a story of the Allies' attempts to break this deadlock.

The Eastern and other fronts, 1914

The war in the east, 1914

On the Eastern Front, greater distances and quite considerable differences between the equipment and quality of the opposing armies ensured a fluidity of the front that was lacking in the west. Trench lines might form, but to break them was not difficult, particularly for the German army, and then mobile operations of the old style could be undertaken.

Urged by the French to take offensive action against the Germans, the Russian commander in chief, Grand Duke Nicholas, took it loyally but prematurely, before the cumbrous Russian war machine was ready, by launching a pincer movement against East Prussia. Under the higher control of General Ya.G. Zhilinsky, two armies, the 1st, or Vilna, Army under P.K. Rennenkampf and the 2nd, or Warsaw, Army under A.V. Samsonov, were to converge, with a two-to-one superiority in numbers, on the German 8th Army in East Prussia from the east and the south, respectively. Rennenkampf's left flank would be separated by 50 miles from Samsonov's right flank.

Max von Prittwitz und Gaffron, commander of the 8th Army, with his headquarters at Neidenburg (Nidzica), had seven divisions and one cavalry division on his eastern front but only the three divisions of Friedrich von Scholtz's XX Corps on his southern. He was therefore dismayed to learn, on August 20, when the bulk of his forces had been repulsed at Gumbinnen (August 19–20) by Rennenkampf's attack from the east, that Samsonov's 13 divisions had crossed the southern frontier of East Prussia and were thus threatening his rear. He initially considered a general retreat, but when his staff objected to this, he approved their counterproposal of an attack on Samsonov's left flank, for which purpose three divisions were to be switched in haste by rail from the Gumbinnen front to reinforce Scholtz (the rest of the Gumbinnen troops could make their retreat by road). The principal exponent of this counterproposal was Lieutenant Colonel Max Hoffmann. Prittwitz, having moved his headquarters northward to Mühlhausen (Młynary), was surprised on August 22 by a telegram announcing that General Paul von Hindenburg, with Ludendorff as his chief of staff, was coming to supersede him in command. Arriving the next day, Ludendorff readily confirmed Hoffmann's dispositions for the blow at Samsonov's left.

Meanwhile, Zhilinsky was not only giving Rennenkampf time to reorganize after Gumbinnen but even instructing him to invest Königsberg instead of pressing on to the west. When the Germans on August 25 learned from an intercepted Russian wireless message (the Russians habitually transmitted combat directives "in clear," not in code) that Rennenkampf was in no hurry to advance, Ludendorff saw a new opportunity. Developing the plan put forward by Hoffmann, Ludendorff concentrated about six divisions against Samsonov's left wing. This force, inferior in strength, could not have been decisive, but Ludendorff then took the calculated risk of withdrawing the rest of the German troops, except for a cavalry screen, from their confrontation with Rennenkampf and rushing them southwestward against Samsonov's right wing. Thus, August von Mackensen's XVII Corps was taken from near Gumbinnen and moved southward to duplicate the planned German attack on Samsonov's left with an attack on

his right, thus completely enveloping the Russian 2nd Army. This daring move was made possible by the notable absence of communication between the two Russian field commanders, whom Hoffmann knew to personally dislike each other. Under the Germans' converging blows Samsonov's flanks were crushed and his centre surrounded during August 26–31. The outcome of this military masterpiece, called the Battle of Tannenberg, was the destruction or capture of almost the whole of Samsonov's army. The history of imperial Russia's unfortunate participation in World War I is epitomized in the ignominious outcome of the Battle of Tannenberg.

The progress of the battle was as follows. Samsonov, his forces spread out along a front 60 miles long, was gradually pushing Scholtz back toward the Allenstein–Osterode (Olsztyn–Ostróda) line when, on August 26, Ludendorff ordered General Hermann von François, with the I Corps on Scholtz's right, to attack Samsonov's left wing near Usdau (Uzdowo). There, on August 27, German artillery bombardments threw the hungry and weary Russians into precipitate flight. François started to pursue them toward Neidenburg, in the rear of the Russian centre, and then made a momentary diversion southward, to check a Russian counterattack from Soldau (Działdowo). Two of the Russian 2nd Army's six army corps managed to escape southeastward at this point, and François then resumed his pursuit to the east. By nightfall on August 29 his troops were in control of the road leading from Neidenburg eastward to Willenberg (Wielbark). The Russian centre, amounting to three army corps, was now caught in the maze of forest between Allenstein and the frontier of Russian Poland. It had no line of retreat, was surrounded by the Germans, and soon dissolved into mobs of hungry and exhausted men who beat feebly against the encircling German ring and then allowed themselves to be taken prisoner by the thousands. Samsonov shot himself in despair on August 29. By the end of August the Germans had taken 92,000 prisoners and annihilated half of the Russian 2nd Army. Ludendorff's bold recall of the last German forces facing Rennenkampf's army was wholly justified in the event, since Rennenkampf remained utterly passive while Samsonov's army was surrounded.

Having received two fresh army corps (seven divisions) from the Western Front, the Germans now turned on the slowly advancing 1st Army under Rennenkampf. The latter was attacked on a line extending from east of Königsberg to the southern end of the chain of the Masurian Lakes during September 1–15 and was driven from East Prussia. As a result of these East Prussian battles Russia had lost about 250,000 men and, what could be afforded still less, much war matériel. But the invasion of East Prussia had at least helped to make possible the French comeback on the Marne by causing the dispatch of two German army corps from the Western Front.

Having ended the Russian threat to East Prussia, the Germans could afford to switch the bulk of their forces from that area to the Częstochowa–Kraków front in southwestern Poland, where the Austrian offensive, launched on August 20, had been rolled back by Russian counterattacks. A new plan for simultaneous thrusts by the Germans toward Warsaw and by the Austrians toward Przemyśl was brought to nothing by the end of October, as the Russians could now mount counterattacks in overwhelming strength, their mobilization being at last nearly completed. The Russians then mounted a powerful effort to invade Prussian Silesia with a huge phalanx of seven armies. Allied hopes rose high as the much-heralded "Russian steamroller" (as the huge Russian army was called) began its ponderous advance. The Russian armies were advancing toward Silesia when Hindenburg and Ludendorff, in November, exploited the superiority of the German railway network: when the retreating German forces had crossed the frontier back into Prussian Silesia, they were promptly moved northward into Prussian Poland and thence sent southeastward to drive a wedge between the two armies of the Russian right flank. The massive Russian operation against Silesia was disorganized, and within a week four new German army corps had arrived from the Western Front. Ludendorff was able to use them to press the Russians back by mid-December to the Bzura–Rawka (rivers) line in front of Warsaw, and the depletion of their munition supplies compelled the Russians to also fall back in Galicia to trench lines along the Nida and Dunajec rivers.

The Serbian campaign, 1914

The first Austrian invasion of Serbia was launched with numerical inferiority (part of one of the armies originally destined for the Balkan front having been diverted to the Eastern Front on August 18), and the able Serbian commander, Radomir Putnik, brought the invasion to an early end by his victories on the Cer Mountain (August 15–20) and at Šabac (August 21–24). In early September, however, Putnik's subsequent northward offensive on the Sava River, in the north, had to be broken off when the Austrians began a second offensive, against the Serbs' western front on the Drina River. After some weeks of deadlock, the Austrians began a third offensive, which had some success in the Battle of the Kolubara, and forced the Serbs to evacuate Belgrade on November 30, but by December 15 a Serbian counterattack had retaken Belgrade and forced the Austrians to retreat. Mud and exhaustion kept the Serbs

from turning the Austrian retreat into a rout, but the victory sufficed to allow Serbia a long spell of freedom from further Austrian advances.

The Turkish entry

The entry of Turkey (or the Ottoman Empire, as it was then called) into the war as a German ally was the one great success of German wartime diplomacy. Since 1909 Turkey had been under the control of the Young Turks, over whom Germany had skillfully gained a dominating influence. German military instructors permeated the Turkish army, and Enver Paşa, the leader of the Young Turks, saw alliance with Germany as the best way of serving Turkey's interests, in particular for protection against the Russian threat to the straits. He therefore persuaded the grand vizier, Said Halim Paşa, to make a secret treaty (negotiated late in July, signed on August 2) pledging Turkey to the German side if Germany should have to take Austria-Hungary's side against Russia. The unforeseen entry of Great Britain into the war against Germany alarmed the Turks, but the timely arrival of two German warships, the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*, in the Dardanelles on August 10 turned the scales in favour of Enver's policy. The ships were ostensibly sold to Turkey, but they retained their German crews. The Turks began detaining British ships, and more anti-British provocations followed, both in the straits and on the Egyptian frontier. Finally the *Goeben* led the Turkish fleet across the Black Sea to bombard Odessa and other Russian ports (October 29–30). Russia declared war against Turkey on November 1; and the western Allies, after an ineffective bombardment of the outer forts of the Dardanelles on November 3, declared war likewise on November 5. A British force from India occupied Basra, on the Persian Gulf, on November 21. In the winter of 1914–15 Turkish offensives in the Caucasus and in the Sinai Desert, albeit abortive, served German strategy well by tying Russian and British forces down in those peripheral areas.

The war at sea, 1914–15

In August 1914 Great Britain, with 29 capital ships ready and 13 under construction, and Germany, with 18 and nine, were the two great rival sea powers. Neither of them at first wanted a direct confrontation: the British were chiefly concerned with the protection of their trade routes; the Germans hoped that mines and submarine attacks would gradually destroy Great Britain's numerical superiority, so that confrontation could eventually take place on equal terms.

World War I; Royal Navy Assembly of the Royal Navy at Spithead for fleet review, July 1914.

The first significant encounter between the two navies was that of the Helgoland Bight, on August 28, 1914, when a British force under Admiral Sir David Beatty, having entered German home waters, sank or damaged several German light cruisers and killed or captured 1,000 men at a cost of one British ship damaged and 35 deaths. For the following months the Germans in European or British waters confined themselves to submarine warfare—not without some notable successes: on September 22 a single German submarine, or U-boat, sank three British cruisers within an hour; on October 7 a U-boat made its way into the anchorage of Loch Ewe, on the west coast of Scotland; on October 15 the British cruiser *Hawke* was torpedoed; and on October 27 the British battleship *Audacious* was sunk by a mine.

On December 15 battle cruisers of the German High Seas Fleet set off on a sortie across the North Sea, under the command of Admiral Franz von Hipper: they bombarded several British towns and then made their way home safely. Hipper's next sortie, however, was intercepted on its way out: on January 24, 1915, in the Battle of the Dogger Bank, the German cruiser *Blücher* was sunk and two other cruisers damaged before the Germans could make their escape.

Abroad on the high seas, the Germans' most powerful surface force was the East Asiatic squadron of fast cruisers, including the *Scharnhorst*, the *Gneisenau*, and the *Nürnberg*, under Admiral Graf Maximilian von Spee. For four months this fleet ranged almost unhindered over the Pacific Ocean, while the *Emden*, having joined the squadron in August 1914, was detached for service in the Indian Ocean. The Germans could thus threaten not only merchant shipping on the British trade routes but also troopships on their way to Europe or the Middle East from India, New Zealand, or Australia. The *Emden* sank merchant ships in the Bay of Bengal, bombarded Madras (September 22; now Chennai, India), haunted the approaches to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and had destroyed 15 Allied ships in all before it was caught and sunk off the Cocos Islands on November 9 by the Australian cruiser *Sydney*.

Meanwhile, Admiral von Spee's main squadron since August had been threading a devious course in the Pacific from the Caroline Islands toward the Chilean coast and had been joined by two more cruisers, the *Leipzig* and the *Dresden*. On November 1, in the Battle of Coronel, it inflicted a sensational defeat on a British force, under Sir Christopher Cradock, which had sailed from the Atlantic to hunt it down: without losing a single ship, it sank Cradock's two major cruisers, Cradock himself being killed. But the fortunes of the war on the high seas were reversed when, on December 8, the German squadron attacked the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands in the South Atlantic, probably unaware of the naval strength that the British, since Coronel, had been concentrating there under Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee: two battle cruisers (the *Invincible* and *Inflexible*, each equipped with eight 12-inch guns) and six other cruisers. The German ships were suffering from wear and tear after their long cruise in the Pacific and were no match for the newer, faster British ships, which soon overtook them. The *Scharnhorst*, with Admiral von Spee aboard, was the first ship to be sunk, then the *Gneisenau*, followed by the *Nürnberg* and the *Leipzig*. The British ships, which had fought at long range so as to render useless the smaller guns of the Germans, sustained only 25 casualties in this engagement. When the German light cruiser *Dresden* was caught and sunk off the Juan Fernández Islands on March 14, 1915, commerce raiding by German surface ships on the high seas was at an end. It was just beginning by German submarines, however.

The belligerent navies were employed as much in interfering with commerce as in fighting each other. Immediately after the outbreak of war, the British had instituted an economic blockade of Germany, with the aim of preventing all supplies reaching that country from the outside world. The two routes by which supplies could reach German ports were: (1) through the English Channel and the Strait of Dover and (2) around the north of Scotland. A minefield laid in the Strait of Dover with a narrow free lane made it fairly easy to intercept and search ships using the Channel. To the north of Scotland, however, there was an area of more than 200,000 square miles (520,000 square kilometres) to be patrolled, and the task was assigned to a squadron of armed merchant cruisers. During the early months of the war, only absolute contraband such as guns and ammunition was restricted, but the list was gradually extended to include almost all material that might be of use to the enemy.

The prevention of the free passage of trading ships led to considerable difficulties among the neutral nations, particularly with the United States, whose trading interests were hampered by British policy. Nevertheless, the British blockade was extremely effective, and during 1915 the British patrols stopped and inspected more than 3,000 vessels, of which 743 were sent into port for examination. Outward-bound trade from Germany was brought to a complete standstill.

The Germans similarly sought to attack Great Britain's economy with a campaign against its supply lines of merchant shipping. In 1915, however, with their surface commerce raiders eliminated from the conflict, they were forced to rely entirely on the submarine.

The Germans began their submarine campaign against commerce by sinking a British merchant steamship (*Glitra*), after evacuating the crew, on October 20, 1914. A number of other sinkings followed, and the Germans soon became convinced that the submarine would be able to bring the British to an early peace where the commerce raiders on the high seas had failed. On January 30, 1915, Germany carried the campaign a stage further by torpedoing three British steamers (*Tokomaru*, *Ikaria*, and *Oriole*) without warning. They next announced, on February 4, that from February 18 they would treat the waters around the British Isles as a war zone in which all Allied merchant ships were to be destroyed, and in which no ship, whether enemy or not, would be immune.

Yet, whereas the Allied blockade was preventing almost all trade for Germany from reaching that nation's ports, the German submarine campaign yielded less satisfactory results. During the first week of the campaign seven Allied or Allied-bound ships were sunk out of 11 attacked, but 1,370 others sailed without being harassed by the German submarines. In the whole of March 1915, during which 6,000 sailings were recorded, only 21 ships were sunk, and in April only 23 ships from a similar number. Apart from its lack of positive success, the U-boat arm was continuously harried by Great Britain's extensive antisubmarine measures, which included nets, specially armed merchant ships, hydrophones for locating the noise of a submarine's engines, and depth bombs for destroying it underwater.

For the Germans, a worse result than any of the British countermeasures imposed on them was the long-term growth of hostility on the part of the neutral countries. Certainly the neutrals were far from happy with the British blockade, but the German declaration of the war zone and subsequent events turned them progressively away from their attitude of sympathy for Germany. The hardening of their outlook began in February 1915, when the Norwegian steamship *Belridge*, carrying oil from New Orleans to Amsterdam, was torpedoed and sunk in the English Channel. The Germans continued to sink neutral ships occasionally, and

undecided countries soon began to adopt a hostile outlook toward this activity when the safety of their own shipping was threatened.

Much more serious was an action that confirmed the inability of the German command to perceive that a minor tactical success could constitute a strategic blunder of the most extreme magnitude. This was the sinking by a German submarine on May 7, 1915, of the British liner *Lusitania*, which was on its way from New York to Liverpool: though the ship was in fact carrying 173 tons of ammunition, it had nearly 2,000 civilian passengers, and the 1,198 people who were drowned included 128 U.S. citizens. The loss of the liner and so many of its passengers, including the Americans, aroused a wave of indignation in the United States, and it was fully expected that a declaration of war might follow. But the U.S. government clung to its policy of neutrality and contented itself with sending several notes of protest to Germany. Despite this, the Germans persisted in their intention and, on August 17, sank the *Arabic*, which also had U.S. and other neutral passengers. Following a new U.S. protest, the Germans undertook to ensure the safety of passengers before sinking liners henceforth; but only after the torpedoing of yet another liner, the *Hesperia*, did Germany, on September 18, decide to suspend its submarine campaign in the English Channel and west of the British Isles, for fear of provoking the United States further. The German civilian statesmen had temporarily prevailed over the naval high command, which advocated "unrestricted" submarine warfare.

THE NEW YORK HERALD.

THE LUSITANIA IS SUNK; 1,000 PROBABLY ARE LOST

GERMANS TORPEDO THE GIANT STEAMSHIP AND SHE FOUNDERS EIGHT MILES FROM IRISH COAST

RESCUE VESSELS SPEED TO THE SCENE TO PICK UP SURVIVORS; ONLY 500 ARE ACCOUNTED FOR

George A. Kessler One of Those Saved, Cable Message to Cunard Office Says

Sinking of the *Lusitania* The *New York Herald* reporting the sinking of the *Lusitania*, a British ocean liner, by a G..(more)

The loss of the German colonies

Germany's overseas colonies, virtually without hope of reinforcement from Europe, defended themselves with varying degrees of success against Allied attack.

Togoland was conquered by British forces from the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and by French forces from Dahomey (now Benin) in the first month of the war. In the Cameroons (German: Kamerun), invaded by Allied forces from the south, the east, and the northwest in August 1914 and attacked from the sea in the west, the Germans put up a more effective resistance, and the last German stronghold there, Mora, held out until February 18, 1916.

Operations by South African forces in huge numerical superiority were launched against German South West Africa (Namibia) in September 1914 but were held up by the pro-German rebellion of certain South African officers who had fought against the British in the South African War of 1899–1902. The rebellion died out in February 1915, but the Germans in South West Africa nevertheless did not capitulate until July 9.

In Jiaozhou (Kiaochow) Bay a small German enclave on the Chinese coast, the port of Qingdao (Tsingtao) was the object of Japanese attack from September 1914. With some help from British troops and from Allied warships, the Japanese captured it on November 7. In October, meanwhile, the Japanese had occupied the Marianas, the Caroline Islands, and the Marshalls in the North Pacific, these islands being defenseless since the departure of Admiral von Spee's naval squadron.

In the South Pacific, Western Samoa (now Samoa) fell without blood at the end of August 1914 to a New Zealand force supported by Australian, British, and French warships. In September an Australian invasion of Neu-Pommern (New Britain) won the surrender of the whole colony of German New Guinea within a few weeks.

The story of German East Africa (comprising present-day Rwanda, Burundi, and continental Tanzania) was very different, thanks to the quality of the local askaris (European-trained African troops) and to the military genius of the German commander Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. A landing of troops from India was repelled with ignominy by the Germans in November 1914. A massive invasion from the north, comprising British and colonial troops under the South African J.C. Smuts, was launched in February 1916, to be coordinated with a Belgian invasion from the west and with an independent British one from Nyasaland in the south, but, though Dar es Salaam fell to Smuts and Tabora to the Belgians in September, Lettow-Vorbeck maintained his small force in being. In November 1917 he began to move southward across Portuguese East Africa (Germany had declared war on Portugal in March 1916), and, after crossing back into German East Africa in September 1918, he turned southwestward to invade Northern Rhodesia in

October. Having taken Kasama on November 9 (two days before the German armistice in Europe), he finally surrendered on November 25. With some 12,000 men at the outset, he eventually tied down 130,000 or more Allied troops.

The years of stalemate

Rival strategies and the Dardanelles campaign, 1915–16

By late 1914 the state of deadlock on the Western Front had become clear to the governments of the warring countries and even to many members of their general staffs. Each side sought a solution to this deadlock, and the solutions varied in form and manner.

Erich von Falkenhayn had succeeded the dispirited Moltke as chief of the German general staff in September 1914. By the end of 1914 Falkenhayn seems to have concluded that although the final decision would be reached in the West, Germany had no immediate prospect of success there, and that the only practicable theatre of operations in the near future was the Eastern Front, however inconclusive those operations might be. Falkenhayn was convinced of the strength of the Allied trench barrier in France, so he took the momentous decision to stand on the defensive in the West.

Falkenhayn saw that a long war was now inevitable and set to work to develop Germany's resources for such a warfare of attrition. Thus, the technique of field entrenchment was carried to a higher pitch by the Germans than by any other country; Germany's military railways were expanded for the lateral movement of reserves; and the problem of the supply of munitions and of the raw materials for their manufacture was tackled so energetically and comprehensively that an ample flow was ensured from the spring of 1915 onward—a time when the British were only awakening to the problem. Here were laid the foundations of that economic organization and utilization of resources that was to be the secret of Germany's power to resist the pressure of the British blockade.

The western Allies were divided into two camps about strategy. Joffre and most of the French general staff, backed by the British field marshal Sir John French, argued for continuing assaults on the Germans' entrenched line in France, despite the continued attrition of French forces that this strategy entailed. Apart from this, the French high command was singularly lacking in ideas to break the deadlock of trench warfare. While desire to hold on to territorial gains governed the German strategy, the desire to recover lost territory dominated the French.

Mark I tank British Mark I tank with anti-bomb roof and "tail," 1916.

British-inspired solutions to the deadlock crystallized into two main groups, one tactical, the other strategical. The first was to unlock the trench barrier by inventing a machine that would be invulnerable to machine guns and capable of crossing trenches and would thus restore the tactical balance upset by the new preponderance of defensive over offensive power. Such a machine had long been contemplated, and the early years of the 20th century saw the first attempts at a practical armoured fighting vehicle. British efforts were nourished and tended in infancy by Winston Churchill, then first lord of the Admiralty, and ultimately, after months of experiment hampered by official opposition, came to maturity in 1916 in the weapon known as the tank. Some of the British strategists, on the other hand, argued that instead of seeking a breakthrough on the Germans' impregnable Western Front, the Allies should turn the whole position of the Central Powers either by an offensive through the Balkans or even by a landing on Germany's Baltic coast. Joffre and his supporters won the argument, and the Balkan projects were relinquished in favour of a concentration of effort on the Western Front. But misgivings were not silenced, and a situation arose that revived the Middle Eastern scheme in a new if attenuated form.

Know about the disastrous Gallipoli Campaign and the role of ANZAC troops in the battles of World W...(more)

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Early in January 1915 the Russians, threatened by the Turks in the Caucasus, appealed to the British for some relieving action against Turkey. The British, after acrimonious argument among themselves, decided in favour of "a naval expedition in February to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsula (the western shore of the Dardanelles), with Constantinople as its objective." Though subsequently it was agreed that army troops might be provided to hold the shores if the fleet forced the Straits, the naval attack began on February 19 without army support. When at last Sir Ian Hamilton's troops from Egypt began to land on the Turkish shores, on April 25, the Turks and their German commander, Otto Liman von Sanders, had had ample time to prepare adequate

fortifications, and the defending armies were now six times as large as when the campaign opened.

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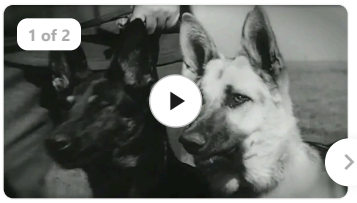
Against resolute opposition from the local Turkish commander (Mustafa Kemal, the future Atatürk), Australian and New Zealand troops won a bridgehead at "Anzac Cove," north of Kaba Tepe, on the Aegean side of the peninsula, with some 20,000 men landing in the first two days. The British, meanwhile, tried to land at five points around Cape Helles but established footholds only at three of them and then asked for reinforcements. Thereafter little progress was made, and the Turks took advantage of the British halt to bring into the peninsula as many troops as possible. The standstill of the enterprise led to a political crisis in London between Churchill, the Liberal government's first lord of the Admiralty, who, after earlier doubts, had made himself the foremost spokesman of the Dardanelles operation, and John, Lord Fisher, the first sea lord, who had always expressed doubts about it. Fisher demanded on May 14 that the operation be discontinued and, when he was overruled, resigned the next day. The Liberal government was replaced by a coalition, but Churchill, though relieved of his former post, remained in the War Council of the Cabinet.



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In July the British began sending five more divisions to the peninsula, and a new plan was hatched. In the hope of cutting the Turks' north–south communications down the peninsula by seizing the Sari Bair heights, which commanded the Straits from the west, the British reinforced the bridgehead at "Anzac Cove" and, in the night of August 6–7, landed more troops at Suvla Bay (Anafarta Limanı), farther to the north. Within a few days, both the offensive from "Anzac" and the new landing had proved ineffectual. More argument ensued in the War Council, and only late in the year was it acknowledged that the initially promising but ill-conducted enterprise should be given up. The evacuation of the troops was carried out from Suvla Bay and from "Anzac Cove" under cover of darkness in December 1915, and from the Cape Helles beaches in January 1916. The Dardanelles campaign thus came to a frustrating end. Had it succeeded it might well have ended Turkey's participation in the war. In failing, it had cost about 214,000 casualties and achieved nothing.

The Western and Eastern fronts, 1915

The Western Front, 1915

Repeated French attacks in February–March 1915 on the Germans' trench barrier in Champagne won only 500 yards (460 metres) of ground at a cost of 50,000 men. For the British, Sir Douglas Haig's 1st Army, between Armentières and Lens, tried a new experiment at Neuve-Chapelle on March 10, when its artillery opened an intense bombardment on a 2,000-yard front and then, after 35 minutes, lengthened its range, so that the attacking British infantry, behind the second screen of shells, could overrun the trenches ravaged by the first. But the experiment's immediate result was merely loss of life, both because shortage of munitions made the second barrage inadequate and because there was a five-hour delay in launching the infantry assault, against which the Germans, having overcome their initial surprise, had time to rally their resistance. It was clear to the Allies that this small-scale tactical experiment had missed success only by a narrow margin and that there was scope for its development. But the Allied commands missed the true lesson, which was that a surprise attack could be successfully made immediately following a short bombardment that compensated for its brevity by its intensity. Instead, they drew the superficial deduction that mere volume of shellfire was the key to reducing a trench line prior to an assault. Not until 1917 did they revert to the Neuve-Chapelle method. It was left to the Germans to profit from the experiment. In the meantime, a French offensive in April against the Germans' Saint-Mihiel salient, southeast of Verdun, sacrificed 64,000 men to no effect.

The Germans, in accordance with Falkenhayn's strategy, remained generally on the defensive in the West. They did, however, launch an attack on the Allies' Ypres salient (where the French had in November 1914 taken the place of the British). There, on April 22, 1915, they used chlorine gas for the first time on the Western Front, but they made the mistake of discharging it from cylinders (which were dependent on a favourable wind) rather than lobbing it onto the enemy trenches in artillery shells. The gas did throw the agonized defenders into chaotic flight; but the German high command, having been disappointed by the new weapon's

performance under adverse conditions in Poland earlier in the year, had failed to provide adequate reserves to exploit its unforeseen success. By the end of a month-long battle, the Allies' front was only slightly retracted.

On May 9, meanwhile, the Allies had launched yet another premature offensive, combining a major French onslaught between Lens and Arras with two thrusts by Haig's 1st Army, from Festubert and from Fromelles, against the Aubers Ridge north of Lens. The French prolonged their effort until June 18, losing 102,000 men without securing any gain; the British, still short of shells against the Germans' mass of machine guns, had suspended their attacks three weeks earlier.

An even worse military failure was the joint offensive launched by the Allies on September 25, 1915. While 27 French divisions with 850 heavy guns attacked on a front 18 miles long in Champagne, north and east of Reims, simultaneous blows were delivered in distant Artois by 14 French divisions with 420 heavy guns on a 12-mile front south of Lens and by six British divisions with only 117 guns at Loos north of Lens. All of these attacks were disappointing failures, partly because they were preceded by prolonged bombardments that gave away any chance of surprise and allowed time for German reserves to be sent forward to close up the gaps that had been opened in the trench defenders' ranks by the artillery bombardment. At Loos the British use of chlorine gas was less effective than Haig had hoped, and his engagement of all his own available forces for his first assault came to nothing when his commander in chief, Sir John French, was too slow in sending up reserves; the French on both their fronts likewise lost, through lack of timely support, most of what they had won by their first attacks. In all, for a little ground, the Allies paid 242,000 men, against the defenders' loss of 141,000.

Having subsequently complained bitterly about Sir John French's management of operations, Haig was appointed British commander in chief in his place in December.

The Eastern Front, 1915

The Russians' plans for 1915 prescribed the strengthening of their flanks in the north and in Galicia before driving westward again toward Silesia. Their preparations for a blow at East Prussia's southern frontier were forestalled, as Ludendorff, striking suddenly eastward from East Prussia, enveloped four Russian divisions in the Augustów forests, east of the Masurian Lakes, in the second week of February; but in Galicia the winter's fighting culminated, on March 22, in the fall of Przemyśl to the Russians.

Russian troops; World War I Russian troops in the trenches at the East Prussian frontier.

For the Central Powers, the Austrian spokesman, Conrad, primarily required some action to relieve the pressure on his Galician front, and Falkenhayn was willing to help him for that purpose without departing from his own general strategy of attrition—which was already coming into conflict with Ludendorff's desire for a sustained effort toward decisive victory over Russia. The plan finally adopted, with the aim of smashing the Russian centre in the Dunajec River sector of Galicia by an attack on the 18-mile front from Gorlice to Tuchów (south of Tarnów), was conceived with tactical originality: in order to maintain the momentum of advance, no daily objectives were to be set for individual corps or divisions; instead, each should make all possible progress before the Russians could bring their reserves up, on the assumption that the rapid advance of some attacking units would contagiously promote the subsequent advance of others that had at first met more resistance. Late in April, 14 divisions, with 1,500 guns, were quietly concentrated for the stroke against the six Russian divisions present. Mackensen was in command, with Hans von Seeckt, sponsor of the new tactic of infiltration, as his chief of staff.

Eastern Front during World War I (1914–18) Map showing the Eastern Front in 1914–18 during World War I.

The Gorlice attack was launched on May 2 and achieved success beyond all expectation. Routed on the Dunajec, the Russians tried to stand on the Wisłoka, then fell back again. By May 14, Mackensen's forces were on the San, 80 miles from their starting point, and at Jarosław they even forced a crossing of that river. Strengthened with more German troops from France, Mackensen then struck again, taking Przemyśl on June 3 and Lemberg (Lvov) on June 22. The Russian front was now bisected, but Falkenhayn and Conrad had foreseen no such result and had made no preparations to exploit it promptly. Their consequent delays enabled the Russian armies to retreat without breaking up entirely.

Falkenhayn then decided to pursue a new offensive. Mackensen was instructed to veer northward, so as to catch the Russian armies in the Warsaw salient between his forces and Hindenburg's, which were to drive southeastward from East Prussia. Ludendorff disliked the plan as being too much of a frontal assault: the Russians might be squeezed by the closing-in of the two wings, but their retreat to the east would not be cut off. He once more urged his spring scheme for a wide enveloping maneuver through Kovno (Kaunas) on Vilna (Vilnius) and Minsk, in the north. Falkenhayn opposed this plan, fearing that it would mean more troops and a deeper commitment, and on July 2 the German emperor decided in favour of Falkenhayn's plan.

The results justified Ludendorff's reservations. The Russians held Mackensen at Brest-Litovsk and Hindenburg on the Narew River long enough to enable the main body of their troops to escape through the unclosed gap to the east. Though by the end of August all of Poland had been occupied and 750,000 Russians had been taken prisoner in four months of fighting, the Central Powers had missed their opportunity to break Russia's ability to carry on the war.

Too late, Falkenhayn in September allowed Ludendorff to try what he had been urging much earlier, a wider enveloping movement to the north on the Kovno–Dvinsk–Vilna triangle. The German cavalry, in fact, approached the Minsk railway, far beyond Vilna; but the Russians' power of resistance was too great for Ludendorff's slender forces, whose supplies moreover began to run out, and by the end of the month his operations were suspended. The crux of this situation was that the Russian armies had been allowed to draw back almost out of the net before the long-delayed Vilna maneuver was attempted. Meanwhile, an Austrian attack eastward from Lutsk (Luck), begun later in September and continued into October, incurred heavy losses for no advantage at all. By October 1915 the Russian retreat, after a nerve-wracking series of escapes from the salients the Germans had systematically created and then sought to cut off, had come to a definite halt along a line running from the Baltic Sea just west of Riga southward to Czernowitz (Chernovtsy) on the Romanian border.

Other fronts, 1915–16

The Caucasus, 1914–16

The Caucasian front between Russia and Turkey comprised two battlegrounds: Armenia in the west, Azerbaijan in the east. While the ultimate strategic objectives for the Turks were to capture the Baku oilfields in Azerbaijan and to penetrate Central Asia and Afghanistan in order to threaten British India, they needed first to capture the Armenian fortress of Kars, which, together with that of Ardahan, had been a Russian possession since 1878.

A Russian advance from Sarıkamış (Sarykamysh, south of Kars) toward Erzurum in Turkish Armenia in November 1914 was countered in December when the Turkish 3rd Army, under Enver himself, launched a three-pronged offensive against the Kars–Ardahan position. This offensive was catastrophically defeated in battles at Sarıkamış and at Ardahan in January 1915; but the Turks, ill-clad and ill-supplied in the Caucasian winter, lost many more men through exposure and exhaustion than in fighting (their 3rd Army was reduced in one month from 190,000 to 12,400 men, the battle casualties being 30,000). Turkish forces, which had meanwhile invaded neutral Persia's part of Azerbaijan and taken Tabriz on January 14, were expelled by a Russian counterinvasion in March.

During this campaign the Armenians had created disturbances behind the Turkish lines in support of the Russians and had threatened the already arduous Turkish communications. The Turkish government on June 11, 1915, decided to deport the Armenians. In the process of deportation, the Turkish authorities committed atrocities on a vast scale: most estimates of Armenian deaths have ranged from 600,000 to 1,500,000 for this period.

Grand Duke Nicholas, who had hitherto been commander in chief of all Russia's armies, was superseded by Emperor Nicholas himself in September 1915; the Grand Duke was then sent to command in the Caucasus. He and General N.N. Yudenich, the victor of Sarıkamış, started a major assault on Turkish Armenia in January 1916; Erzurum was taken on February 16, Trabzon on April 18, Erzıncan on August 2; and a long-delayed Turkish counterattack was held at Oğnut. Stabilized to Russia's great advantage in the autumn, the new front in Armenia was thereafter affected less by Russo-Turkish warfare than by the consequences of revolution in Russia.

Mesopotamia, 1914–April 1916

The British occupation of Basra, Turkey's port at the head of the Persian Gulf, in November 1914 had been justifiable strategically because of the need to protect the oil wells of southern Persia and the Abadan refinery. The British advance of 46 miles northward from Basra to al-Qurnah in December and the further advance of 90 miles up the Tigris to al-ʿAmārah in May–June 1915 ought to have been reckoned enough for all practical purposes, but the advance was continued in the direction of the fatally magnetic Baghdad, ancient capital of the Arab caliphs of Islām. Al-Kūt was occupied in September 1915, and the advance was pushed on until the British, under Major General Charles Townshend, were 500 miles away from their base at Basra. They fought a profitless battle at Ctesiphon, only 18 miles from Baghdad, on November 22 but then had to retreat to al-Kūt. There, from December 7, Townshend's 10,000 men were besieged by the Turks; and there, on April 29, 1916, they surrendered themselves into captivity.

The Egyptian frontiers, 1915–July 1917

Even after the evacuation from Gallipoli, the British maintained 250,000 troops in Egypt. A major source of worry to the British was the danger of a Turkish threat from Palestine across the Sinai Desert to the Suez Canal. That danger waned, however, when the initially unpromising rebellion of the Hāshimite amir Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī against the Turks in the Hejaz was developed by the personal enterprise of an unprofessional soldier of genius, T.E. Lawrence, into a revolt infecting the whole Arabian hinterland of Palestine and Syria and threatening to sever the Turks' vital Hejaz Railway (Damascus–Amman–Maʿān–Medina). Sir Archibald Murray's British troops at last started a massive advance in December 1916 and captured some Turkish outposts on the northeastern edge of the Sinai Desert but made a pusillanimous withdrawal from Gaza in March 1917 at the very moment when the Turks were about to surrender the place to them; the attempt the next month to retrieve the mistake was repulsed with heavy losses. In June the command was transferred from Murray to Sir Edmund Allenby. In striking contrast to Murray's performance was Lawrence's capture of Aqaba (al-ʿAqabah) on July 6, 1917: his handful of Arabs got the better of 1,200 Turks there.

Italy and the Italian front, 1915–16

Great Britain, France, and Russia concluded on April 26, 1915, the secret Treaty of London with Italy, inducing the latter to discard the obligations of the Triple Alliance and to enter the war on the side of the Allies by the promise of territorial aggrandizement at Austria-Hungary's expense. Italy was offered not only the Italian-populated Trentino and Trieste but also South Tirol (to consolidate the Alpine frontier), Gorizia, Istria, and northern Dalmatia. On May 23, 1915, Italy accordingly declared war on Austria-Hungary.

The Italian commander, General Luigi Cadorna, decided to concentrate his effort on an offensive eastward from the province of Venetia across the comparatively low ground between the head of the Adriatic and the foothills of the Julian Alps; that is to say, across the lower valley of the Isonzo (Soč̌a) River. Against the risk of an Austrian descent on his rear from the Trentino (which bordered Venetia to the northwest) or on his left flank from the Carnic Alps (to the north), he thought that limited advances would be precaution enough.

The Italians' initial advance eastward, begun late in May 1915, was soon halted, largely because of the flooding of the Isonzo, and trench warfare set in. Cadorna, however, was determined to make progress and so embarked on a series of persistent renewals of the offensive, known as the Battles of the Isonzo. The first four of these (June 23–July 7; July 18–August 3; October 18–November 4; and November 10–December 2) achieved nothing worth the cost of 280,000 men; and the fifth (March 1916) was equally fruitless. The Austrians had shown on this front a fierce resolution that was often lacking when they faced the Russians. In mid-May 1916 Cadorna's program was interrupted by an Austrian offensive from the Trentino into the Asiago region of western Venetia. Though the danger of an Austrian breakthrough from the mountainous borderland into the Venetian plain in the rear of the Italians' Isonzo front was averted, the Italian counteroffensive in mid-June recovered only one-third of the territory overrun by the Austrians north and southwest of Asiago. The Sixth Battle of the Isonzo (August 6–17), however, did win Gorizia for the Italians. On August 28 Italy declared war on Germany. The next three months saw three more Italian offensives on the Isonzo, none of them really profitable. In the course of 1916 the Italians had sustained 500,000 casualties, twice as many as the Austrians, and were still on the Isonzo.

Serbia and the Salonika expedition, 1915–17

Austria's three attempted invasions of Serbia in 1914 had been brusquely repulsed by Serbian counterattacks. By the summer of 1915 the Central Powers were doubly concerned to close the account with Serbia, both for reasons of prestige and for the sake of

establishing secure rail communications with Turkey across the Balkans. In August, Germany sent reinforcements to Austria's southern front; and, on September 6, 1915, the Central Powers concluded a treaty with Bulgaria, whom they drew to their side by the offer of territory to be taken from Serbia. The Austro-German forces attacked southward from the Danube on October 6; and the Bulgars, undeterred by a Russian ultimatum, struck at eastern Serbia on October 11 and at Serbian Macedonia on October 14.

The western Allies, surprised in September by the prospect of a Bulgarian attack on Serbia, hastily decided to send help through neutral Greece's Macedonian port of Salonika, relying on the collusion of Greece's pro-Entente prime minister, Eleuthérios Venizélos. Troops from Gallipoli, under the French general Maurice Sarrail, reached Salonika on October 5, but on that day Venizélos fell from power.

Sarrail, Maurice Maurice Sarrail, World War I.

The Allies advanced northward up the Vardar into Serbian Macedonia but found themselves prevented from junction with the Serbs by the westward thrust of the Bulgars. Driven back over the Greek frontier, the Allies were merely occupying the Salonika region by mid-December. The Serbian Army, meanwhile, to avoid double envelopment, had begun an arduous winter retreat westward over the Albanian mountains to refuge on the island of Corfu. English relief worker Mabel St. Clair Stobart, who had been commissioned a major in the Serbian army, led the First Serbian-English Field Hospital (Front) during the retreat. Stobart achieved some renown for the feat, as her unit was one of the few to reach the Albanian coast without suffering any losses or desertions.

Mabel St. Clair Stobart Mabel St. Clair Stobart (left), founder of the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps a..(more)

In the spring of 1916 the Allies at Salonika were reinforced by the revived Serbs from Corfu as well as by French, British, and some Russian troops, and the bridgehead was expanded westward to Vodena (Edessa) and eastward to Kilkis; but the Bulgars, who in May obtained Fort Rupel (Klidhi, on the Struma) from the Greeks, in mid-August not only overran Greek Macedonia east of the Struma but also, from Monastir (Bitola), invaded the Florina region of Greek Macedonia, to the west of the Allies' Vodena wing. The Allied counteroffensive took Monastir from the Bulgars in November 1916, but more ambitious operations, from March to May 1917, proved abortive. The Salonika front was tying down some 500,000 Allied troops without troubling the Central Powers in any significant way.

Major developments in 1916

The Western Front, 1916

In 1914 the centre of gravity of World War I had been on the Western Front, in 1915 it shifted to the Eastern, and in 1916 it once more moved back to France. Though the western Allies had dissipated some of their strength in the Dardanelles, Salonika, and Mesopotamia, the rising tide of Britain's new armies and of its increased munition supplies promised the means for an offensive far larger in scale than any before to break the trench deadlock. Britain's armies in France had grown to 36 divisions by the end of 1915. By that time voluntary enlistments, though massive, had nevertheless proved to be inadequate to meet Britain's needs, so in January 1916, by the Military Service Act, voluntary service was replaced by conscription.

In December 1915 a conference of the leaders of the French, British, Belgian, and Italian armies, with representatives present from the Russian and Japanese armies, was held at Joffre's headquarters. They adopted the principle of a simultaneous general offensive in 1916 by France, Great Britain, Russia, and Italy. But military action by Germany was to dislocate this scheme, and only the British offensive came fully into operation.

By the winter of 1915–16, Falkenhayn regarded Russia as paralyzed and Italy as inconsiderable. He considered the time at last ripe for positive action against France, after whose collapse Great Britain would have no effective military ally on the European continent and would be brought to terms rather by submarine warfare than by land operations. For his offensive in the West, however, Falkenhayn clung always to his method of attrition. He believed that a mass breakthrough was unnecessary and that instead the Germans should

aim to bleed France of its manpower by choosing a point of attack “for the retention of which the French Command would be compelled to throw in every man they have.” The town of Verdun and its surrounding complex of forts was chosen, because it was a menace to the main German lines of communications, because it was within a French salient and thus cramped the defenders, and because of the certainty that the French would sacrifice any number of men to defend Verdun for reasons of patriotism associated with the town itself.

Brutal truths of the Battle of Verdun Overview of the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

See all videos for this article

The keynote of Falkenhayn’s tactical plan was to place a dense semicircle of German heavy and medium artillery to the north and east of Verdun and its outlying fortresses and then to stage a continuous series of limited infantry advances upon the forts. These advances would draw the French infantry into defending or trying to retake the forts, in the process of which they would be pulverized by German artillery fire. In addition, each German infantry advance would have its way smoothed by a brief but extremely intense artillery bombardment that would clear the targeted ground of defenders.

Verdun, France French troops passing though the ruins of Verdun, France, 1916.

Although French Intelligence had given early warnings of the Germans’ offensive preparations, the French high command was so preoccupied with its own projected offensive scheme that the warning fell on deaf ears. At 7:15 AM on February 21, 1916, the heaviest German artillery bombardment yet seen in the war began on a front of eight miles around Verdun, and the French trenches and barbed wire fields there were flattened out or upheaved in a chaos of tumbled earth. At 4:45 PM the German infantry advanced—although for the first day only on a front of two and a half miles. From then until February 24 the French defenders’ lines east of the Meuse River crumbled away. Fort-Douaumont, one of the most important fortresses, was occupied by the Germans on February 25. By March 6, when the Germans began to attack on the west bank of the Meuse as well as on the east bank, the French had come to see that something more than a feint was intended. To relieve the pressure on France, the Russians made a sacrificial attack on the Eastern Front at Lake Naroch (see below The Eastern Front, 1916); the Italians began their fifth offensive on the Isonzo (see above Italy and the Italian front, 1915–16); and the British took over the Arras sector of the Western Front, thus becoming responsible for the whole line from the Yser southward to the Somme. Meanwhile, General Philippe Pétain was entrusted with commanding the defense of Verdun. He organized repeated counterattacks that slowed the German advance, and, more importantly, he worked to keep open the one road leading into Verdun that had not been closed by German shelling. This was the Bar-le-Duc road, which became known as La Voie Sacrée (the “Sacred Way”) because vital supplies and reinforcements continued to be sent to the Verdun front along it despite constant harassment from the German artillery.

Slowly but steadily the Germans moved forward on Verdun: they took Fort-Vaux, southeast of Fort-Douaumont, on June 7 and almost reached the Belleville heights, the last stronghold before Verdun itself, on June 23. Pétain was preparing to evacuate the east bank of the Meuse when the Allies’ offensive on the Somme River was at last launched. Thereafter, the Germans assigned no more divisions to the Verdun attack.

Preceded by a week’s bombardment, which gave ample warning of its advent, the Somme offensive was begun on July 1, 1916, by the 11 British divisions of Rawlinson’s new 4th Army on a 15-mile front between Serre, north of the Ancre, and Curlu, north of the Somme, while five French divisions attacked at the same time on an eight-mile front mainly south of the Somme, between Curlu and Péronne. With incredibly misplaced optimism, Haig had convinced himself that the British infantry would be able to walk forward irresistibly over ground cleared of defenders by the artillery. But the unconcealed preparations for the assault and the long preliminary bombardment had given away any chance of surprise, and the German defenders were well prepared for what was to come. In the event, the 60,000 attacking British infantrymen moving forward in symmetrical alignment at a snail’s pace enforced by each man’s 66 pounds (30 kilograms) of cumbrous equipment were mowed down in masses by the German machine guns, and the day’s casualties were the heaviest ever sustained by a British army. The French participants in the attack had twice as many guns as the British and did better against a weaker system of defenses, but almost nothing could be done to exploit this comparative success.

Resigning himself now to limited advances, Haig concentrated his next effort on the southern sector of his Somme front. The Germans’ second position there (Longueval, Bazentin, and Ovillers) fell on July 14, but again the opportunity of exploitation was missed. Thenceforward, at great cost in lives, a methodical advance was continued, gaining little ground but straining the German resistance. The first tanks to be used in the war, though in numbers far too small to be effective, were thrown into the battle by the

British on September 15. In mid-November early rains halted operations. The four-month Battle of the Somme was a miserable failure except that it diverted German resources from the attack on Verdun. It cost the British 420,000 casualties, the French 195,000, and the Germans 650,000.

At Verdun, the summer slackening of German pressure enabled the French to organize counterattacks. Surprise attacks directed by General Robert-Georges Nivelle and launched by General Charles Mangin's army corps recovered Fort-Douaumont on October 24, Fort-Vaux on November 2, and places north of Douaumont in mid-December. Pétain's adroit defense of Verdun and these counterattacks had deprived Falkenhayn's offensive of its strategic fulfillment; but France had been so much weakened in the first half of 1916 that it could scarcely satisfy the Allies' expectations in the second. Verdun was one of the longest, bloodiest, and most ferocious battles of the war; French casualties amounted to about 400,000, German ones to about 350,000.

The Battle of Jutland

The summer of 1916 saw the long-deferred confrontation of Germany's High Seas Fleet and Great Britain's Grand Fleet in the Battle of Jutland—history's biggest naval battle, which both sides claimed as a victory.

Admiral Reinhard Scheer, who became commander in chief of the High Seas Fleet in January 1916, planned to contrive an encounter on the open sea between his fleet and some part of the British fleet in separation from the whole, so that the Germans could exploit their momentary superiority in numbers to achieve victory. Scheer's plan was to ensnare Admiral Beatty's squadron of battle cruisers at Rosyth, midway up Britain's eastern coast, by stratagem and destroy it before any reinforcements from the Grand Fleet's main base at Scapa Flow could reach it.

To set the trap, five battle cruisers of the German High Seas Fleet, together with four light cruisers, were to sail northward, under Hipper's command, from Wilhelmshaven, Ger., to a point off the southwestern coast of Norway. Scheer himself, with the battle squadrons of the High Seas Fleet, was to follow, 50 miles behind, to catch Beatty's forces in the gap once they had been lured eastward across the North Sea in pursuit of Hipper. But the signal for the German operation to begin, made in the afternoon of May 30, was intercepted and partially decoded by the British; and before midnight the whole British Grand Fleet was on its way to a rendezvous off Norway's southwestern coast and roughly across the planned route of the German fleet.

At 2:20 PM on May 31, when Admiral John Jellicoe's Grand Fleet squadrons from Scapa Flow were still 65 miles away to the north, Beatty's advance guard of light cruisers—five miles ahead of his heavier ships—and Hipper's scouting group learned quite accidentally of one another's proximity. An hour later the two lines were drawn up for battle, and in the next 50 minutes the British suffered severely, and the *Indefatigable* was sunk. When Beatty's battle cruisers came up, however, the German cruisers, in their turn, sustained such damage that Hipper sent a protective screen of German destroyers in to launch a torpedo attack. The British had lost another battle cruiser, the *Queen Mary*, before the German High Seas Fleet was sighted by a British patrol to the south, at 4:35 PM. On this report Beatty ordered his ships northward, to lure the Germans toward the Grand Fleet under Jellicoe's command.

Not until 6:14 PM, after Jellicoe's squadrons and Beatty's had been within sight of one another for nearly a quarter of an hour, was the German fleet precisely located—only just in time for Jellicoe to deploy his ships to the best advantage. Jellicoe arrayed the Grand Fleet end-to-end in a line so that their combined broadsides could be brought to bear on the approaching German ships, who could in turn reply only with the forward guns of their leading ships. The British ships in effect formed the horizontal stroke and the German ships the vertical stroke of the letter "T," with the British having deployed into line at a right angle to the German ships' forward progress. This maneuver was in fact known as "crossing the enemy's T" and was the ideal situation dreamed of by the tacticians of both navies, since by "crossing the T" one's forces temporarily gained an overwhelming superiority of firepower.

For the Germans this was a moment of unparalleled risk. Three factors helped prevent the destruction of the German ships in this trap: their own excellent construction, the steadiness and discipline of their crews, and the poor quality of the British shells. The *Lützow*, the *Derfflinger*, and the battleship *König* led the line and were under broadside fire from some 10 British battleships, yet their main guns remained undamaged and they fought back to such effect that one of their salvoes fell full on the *Invincible* and blew it up. This success, however, did little to relieve the intense bombardment from the other British ships, and the German fleet was still pressing forward into the steel trap of the Grand Fleet.

Relying on the magnificent seamanship of the German crews, Scheer extricated his fleet from the appalling danger into which it had run by a simple but, in practice, extremely difficult maneuver. At 6:30 PM he ordered a turn of 180° for all his ships at once; it was

executed without collision; and the German battleships reversed course in unison and steamed out of the jaws of the trap, while German destroyers spread a smoke screen across their rear. The smoke and worsening visibility left Jellicoe in doubt about what had happened, and the British had lost contact with the Germans by 6:45 PM.

Yet the British Grand Fleet had maneuvered in such a way that it ended up between the German High Seas Fleet and the German ports, and this was the situation Scheer most dreaded, so at 6:55 PM Scheer ordered another reverse turn, perhaps hoping to pass around the rear of the British fleet. But the result for him was a worse position than that from which he had just escaped: his battle line had become compressed, and his leading ships found themselves again under intense bombardment from the broadside array of the British ships. Jellicoe had succeeded in crossing the Germans' "T" again. The *Lützow* now received irreparable damage, and many other German ships were damaged at this point. At 7:15 PM, therefore, to cause a diversion and win time, Scheer ordered his battle cruisers and destroyers ahead to virtually immolate themselves in a massed charge against the British ships.

This was the crisis of the Battle of Jutland. As the German battle cruisers and destroyers steamed forward, the German battleships astern became confused and disorganized in trying to execute their reverse turn. Had Jellicoe ordered the Grand Fleet forward through the screen of charging German battle cruisers at that moment, the fate of the German High Seas Fleet would likely have been sealed. As it was, fearing and overestimating the danger of torpedo attacks from the approaching destroyers, he ordered his fleet to turn away, and the two lines of battleships steamed apart at a speed of more than 20 knots. They did not meet again, and when darkness fell, Jellicoe could not be sure of the route of the German retreat. By 3:00 AM on June 1 the Germans had safely eluded their pursuers.

The British had sustained greater losses than the Germans in both ships and men. In all, the British lost three battle cruisers, three cruisers, eight destroyers, and 6,274 officers and men in the Battle of Jutland. The Germans lost one battleship, one battle cruiser, four light cruisers, five destroyers, and 2,545 officers and men. The losses inflicted on the British, however, were not enough to affect the numerical superiority of their fleet over the German in the North Sea, where their domination remained practically unchallengeable during the course of the war. Henceforth, the German High Seas Fleet chose not to venture out from the safety of its home ports.

The Eastern Front, 1916

In the hope of diverting German strength from the attack at Verdun on the Western Front, the Russians gallantly but prematurely opened an offensive north and south of Lake Naroch (Narocz, east of Vilna) on March 18, 1916, and continued it until March 27, though they won very little ground at great cost and only for a short time. They then reverted to preparations for a major offensive in July. The main blow, it was planned, should be delivered by A.E. Evert's central group of armies, assisted by an inward movement of A.N. Kuropatkin's army in the northern sector of the front. But at the same time, A.A. Brusilov's southwestern army group was authorized to make a supposedly diversionary attack in its own sectors. In the event, Brusilov's attack became by far the more important operation of the offensive.

Surprised by the Austrians' Asiago offensive in May, Italy promptly appealed to the Russians for action to draw the enemy's reserves away from the Italian fronts, and the Russians responded by advancing their timetable again. Brusilov undertook to start his attack on June 4, on the understanding that Evert's should be launched 10 days later.

Thus began an offensive on the Eastern Front that was to be imperial Russia's last really effective military effort. Popularly known as Brusilov's offensive, it had such an astonishing initial success as to revive Allied dreams about the irresistible Russian "steamroller." Instead, its ultimate achievement was to sound the death knell of the Russian monarchy. Brusilov's four armies were distributed along a very wide front, with Lutsk at the northern end, Tarnopol and Buchach (Buczacz) in the central sector, and Czernowitz at the southern end. Having struck first in the Tarnopol and Czernowitz sectors on June 4, Brusilov on June 5 took the Austrians wholly by surprise when he launched A.M. Kaledin's army toward Lutsk: the defenses crumbled at once, and the attackers pushed their way between two Austrian armies. As the offensive was developed, the Russians were equally successful in the Buchach sector and in their thrust into Bukovina, which culminated in the capture of Czernowitz. By June 20, Brusilov's forces had captured 200,000 prisoners.

Evert and Kuropatkin, however, instead of striking in accordance with the agreed plan, found excuses for procrastination. The Russian chief of general staff, M.V. Alekseyev, therefore tried to transfer this inert couple's reserves to Brusilov, but the Russians' lateral communications were so poor that the Germans had time to reinforce the Austrians before Brusilov was strong enough to

make the most of his victory. Though his forces in Bukovina advanced as far as the Carpathian Mountains, a counterstroke by Alexander von Linsingen's Germans in the Lutsk sector checked Russian progress at the decisive point. Further Russian drives from the centre of Brusilov's front were launched in July; but by early September the opportunity of exploiting the summer's victory was lost. Brusilov had driven the Austrians from Bukovina and from much of eastern Galicia and had inflicted huge losses of men and equipment on them, but he had depleted Russia's armies by about 1,000,000 men in doing so. (A large portion of this number consisted of deserters or prisoners.) This loss seriously undermined both the morale and the material strength of Russia. Brusilov's offensive also had indirect results of great consequence. First, it had compelled the Germans to withdraw at least seven divisions from the Western Front, where they could ill be spared from the Verdun and Somme battles. Second, it hastened Romania's unfortunate entry into the war.

Disregarding Romania's military backwardness, the Romanian government of Ionel Brătianu declared war against Austria-Hungary on August 27, 1916. In entering the war, Romania succumbed to the Allies' offers of Austro-Hungarian territory and to the belief that the Central Powers would be too much preoccupied with other fronts to mount any serious riposte against a Romanian offensive. Some 12 of Romania's 23 divisions, in three columns, thus began on August 28 a slow westward advance across Transylvania, where at first there were only five Austro-Hungarian divisions to oppose them.

The riposte of the Central Powers was swifter than the progress of the invasion: Germany, Turkey, and Bulgaria declared war against Romania on August 28, August 30, and September 1, respectively; and Falkenhayn had plans already prepared. Though the miscarriage of his overall program for the year led to his being replaced by Hindenburg as chief of the German general staff on August 29, Falkenhayn's recommendation that Mackensen should direct a Bulgarian attack on southern Romania was approved; and Falkenhayn himself went to command on the Transylvanian front, for which five German as well as two more Austrian divisions were found available as reinforcements.

Mackensen's forces from Bulgaria stormed the Turtucaia (Tutrakan) bridgehead on the Danube southeast of Bucharest on September 5. His subsequent advance eastward into the Dobruja caused the Romanians to switch their reserves to that quarter instead of reinforcing their Transylvanian enterprise, which thereupon came to a halt. Falkenhayn soon attacked: first at the southern end of the 200-mile front, where he threw one of the Romanian columns back into the Roter Turm (Turnu Roşu) Pass, then in the centre, where by October 9 he had defeated another at Kronstadt (Braşov). For a month, however, the Romanians withstood Falkenhayn's attempts to drive them out of the Vulcan and Szurduk (Surduc) passes into Walachia. But just before winter snows blocked the way, the Germans took the two passes and advanced southward to Tîrgu Jiu, where they won another victory. Then Mackensen, having turned westward from the Dobruja, crossed the Danube near Bucharest, on which his and Falkenhayn's armies converged. Bucharest fell on December 6, and the Romanian Army, a crippled force, could only fall back northeastward into Moldavia, where it had the belated support of Russian troops. The Central Powers had access to Romania's wheat fields and oil wells, and the Russians had 300 more miles of front to defend.

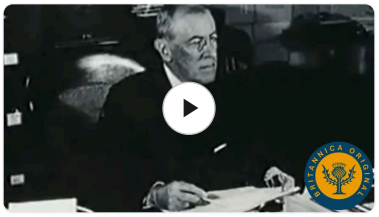
German strategy and the submarine war, 1916–January 1917

Both Admiral Scheer and General Falkenhayn doubted whether the German submarines could do any decisive damage to Great Britain so long as their warfare was restricted in deference to the protests of the United States; and, after a tentative reopening of the submarine campaign on February 4, 1916, the German naval authorities in March gave the U-boats permission to sink without warning all ships except passenger vessels. The German civilian statesmen, however, who paid due attention to their diplomats' warnings about U.S. opinion, were soon able to prevail over the generals and the admirals: on May 4 the scope of the submarine campaign was again severely restricted.

The controversy between the statesmen and the advocates of unrestricted warfare was not dead yet. Hindenburg, chief of the general staff from August 29, had Ludendorff as his quartermaster general, and Ludendorff was quickly won over to supporting the chief of the Admiralty staff, Henning von Holtzendorff, in his arguments against the German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and the foreign minister, Gottlieb von Jagow. Whereas Bethmann and some other statesmen were hoping for a negotiated peace (see below), Hindenburg and Ludendorff were committed to a military victory. The British naval blockade, however, threatened to starve Germany into collapse before a military victory could be achieved, and soon Hindenburg and Ludendorff got their way: it was decided that, from February 1, 1917, submarine warfare should be unrestricted and overtly so.

Peace moves and U.S. policy to February 1917

There were few efforts by any of the Central or Allied Powers to achieve a negotiated peace in the first two years of the war. By 1916 the most promising signs for peace seemed to exist only in the intentions of two statesmen in power—the German chancellor Bethmann and the U.S. president Woodrow Wilson. Wilson, having proclaimed the neutrality of the United States in August 1914, strove for the next two years to maintain it. (*See* the video.) Early in 1916 he sent his confidant, Colonel Edward M. House, to sound London and Paris about the possibility of U.S. mediation between the belligerents. House's conversations with the British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, resulted in the House–Grey Memorandum (February 22, 1916), declaring that the United States might enter the war if Germany rejected Wilson's mediation but that Great Britain reserved the right to initiate U.S. mediatory action. By mid-1916, the imminent approach of the presidential election in the United States caused Wilson to suspend his moves for peace.



Examine how German U-boats and the Zimmerman Telegram pushed the United States into World War I See why the ...(more)

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In Germany, meanwhile, Bethmann had succeeded, with difficulty, in postponing the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare. Wilson, though he was reelected president on November 7, 1916, let another month pass without doing anything for peace, and during that period the German victory over Romania was taking place. Thus, while Bethmann lost patience with waiting for Wilson to act, the German military leaders came momentarily to think that Germany, from a position of strength, might now propose a peace acceptable to themselves. Having been constrained to agree with the militarists that, if his proposals were rejected by the Allies, unrestricted submarine warfare should be resumed, Bethmann was allowed to announce, on December 12, the terms of a German offer of peace—terms, however, that were militarily so far-reaching as to preclude the Allies' acceptance of them. The main stumbling block was Germany's insistence upon its annexation of Belgium and of the occupied portion of northeastern France.

On December 18, 1916, Wilson invited both belligerent camps to state their "war aims." The Allies were secretly encouraged by the U.S. secretary of state to offer terms too sweeping for German acceptance; and the Germans, suspecting collusion between Wilson and the Allies, agreed in principle to the opening of negotiations but left their statement of December 12 practically unchanged and privately decided that Wilson should not actually take part in any negotiation that he might bring about. By mid-January 1917 the December overtures had ended.

Strangely enough, Wilson's next appeal, a speech of January 22, 1917, preaching international conciliation and a "peace without victory," elicited a confidential response from the British expressing readiness to accept his mediation. In the opposite camp, Austria-Hungary would likewise have listened readily to peace proposals, but Germany had already decided, on January 9, to declare unrestricted submarine warfare. Bethmann's message restating Germany's peace terms and inviting Wilson to persevere in his efforts was delivered on January 31 but was paradoxically accompanied by the announcement that unrestricted submarine warfare would begin the next day.

Wilson severed diplomatic relations between the United States and Germany on February 3, 1917, and asked Congress, on February 26, for power to arm merchantmen and to take all other measures to protect U.S. commerce. But American opinion was still not ready for war, and the Germans wisely abstained from attacks on U.S. shipping. What changed the tenor of public feeling was the publication of the Zimmermann Telegram.

Arthur Zimmermann had succeeded Jagow as Germany's secretary of state for foreign affairs in November 1916; and in that same month the Mexican president, Venustiano Carranza, whose country's relations with the United States had been critical since March, had virtually offered bases on the Mexican coast to the Germans for their submarines. Zimmermann on January 16, 1917, sent a coded telegram to his ambassador in Mexico instructing him to propose to the Mexican government that, if the United States should enter the war against Germany, Mexico should become Germany's ally with a view to recovering Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona from the United States. Intercepted and decoded by the British Admiralty Intelligence, this message was communicated to Wilson on February 24. It was published in the U.S. press on March 1, and it immediately set off a nationwide demand for war against Germany.

Developments in 1917

The Western Front, January–May 1917

The western Allies had good reason to be profoundly dissatisfied with the poor results of their enterprises of 1916, and this dissatisfaction was signalized by two major changes made at the end of the year. In Great Britain, the government of H.H. Asquith, already turned into a coalition in May 1915, was replaced in December 1916 by a coalition under David Lloyd George; and that same month in France the post of commander in chief of the army was transferred from Joffre to General R.-G. Nivelle.

As for the military situation, the fighting strength of the British Army on the Western Front had grown to about 1,200,000 men and was still growing. That of the French Army had been increased by the incorporation of colonial troops to some 2,600,000, so that, including the Belgians, the Allies disposed an estimated 3,900,000 men against 2,500,000 Germans. To the Allies, these figures suggested an offensive on their part.

Nivelle, who owed his appointment to the contrast between the brilliant success of his recent counterattacks at Verdun and the meagre results of Joffre's strategy of attrition, was deeply imbued with the optimism of which experience was by now curing Joffre. He also had ideas of national glory and, accordingly, modified plans made by Joffre in such a way as to assign to the French Army the determinant role in the offensive that, it was calculated, must decide the issue on the Western Front in 1917. Nivelle's plan in its final stage was that the British should make preparatory attacks not only north of the wilderness of the old Somme battlefields but also south of them (in the sector previously held by French troops); that these preparatory attacks should attract the German reserves; and, finally, that the French should launch the major offensive in Champagne (their forces in that sector having been strengthened both by new troops from the overseas colonies and by those transferred from the Somme). The tactics Nivelle planned to use were based on those he had employed so successfully at Verdun. But he placed an optimistic overreliance on his theory of combining "great violence with great mass," which basically consisted of intense artillery bombardments followed by massive frontal attacks.

Meanwhile, Ludendorff had foreseen a renewal of the Allied offensive on the Somme, and he used his time to frustrate Nivelle's plans and to strengthen the German front in two different ways. First, the hitherto rather shallow defenses in Champagne were by mid-February reinforced with a third line, out of range of the French artillery. Second, Ludendorff decided to anticipate the attack by falling back to a new and immensely strong line of defense. This new line, called the Siegfriedstellung, or "Hindenburg Line," was rapidly constructed across the base of the great salient formed by the German lines between Arras and Reims. From the German position east of Arras, the line ran southeastward and southward, passing west of Cambrai and Saint-Quentin to rejoin the old German line at Anizy (between Soissons and Laon). After a preliminary step backward on February 23, a massive withdrawal of all German troops from the westernmost bulges of the great salient to the new and shorter line was smoothly and quickly made on March 16. The major towns within the areas evacuated by the Germans (i.e., Bapaume, Péronne, Roye, Noyon, Chauny, and Coucy) were abandoned to the Allies, but the area was left as a desert, with roads mined, trees cut down, wells fouled, and houses demolished, the ruins being strewn with explosive booby traps.

This baffling and unexpected German withdrawal dislocated Nivelle's plan, but, unperturbed by warnings from all quarters about the changed situation, Nivelle insisted on carrying it out. The Battle of Arras, with which the British started the offensive on April 9, 1917, began well enough for the attackers, thanks to much-improved artillery methods and to a new poison gas shell that paralyzed the hostile artillery. Vimy Ridge, at the northern end of the 15-mile battlefront, fell to the Canadian Corps, but the exploitation of this success was frustrated by the congestion of traffic in the British rear, and though the attack was continued until May 5, stiffer German resistance prevented exploitation of the advances made in the first five days.

Nivelle's own offensive in Champagne, launched on April 16 on the Aisne front from Vailly eastward toward Craonne and Reims, proved to be a fiasco. The attacking troops were trapped in a web of machine-gun fire, and by nightfall the French had advanced about 600 yards instead of the six miles anticipated in Nivelle's program. Only on the wings was any appreciable progress achieved. The results compared favourably with Joffre's offensives, as some 28,000 German prisoners were taken at a cost to the French of just under 120,000 casualties. But the effect on French morale was worse, because Nivelle's fantastic predictions of the offensive's success were more widely known than Joffre's had ever been. With the collapse of Nivelle's plan, his fortunes were buried in the ruins, and after some face-saving delay he was superseded as commander in chief by Pétain on May 15, 1917.

This change was made too late to avert a more harmful sequel, for in late April a mutiny broke out among the French infantry and spread until 16 French army corps were affected. The authorities chose to ascribe it to seditious propaganda, but the mutinous outbreaks always occurred when exhausted troops were ordered back into the line, and they signaled their grievances by such significant cries as: "We'll defend the trenches, but we won't attack." Pétain restored tranquillity by meeting the just grievances of

the troops; his reputation for sober judgment restored the troops' confidence in their leaders, and he made it clear that he would avoid future reckless attacks on the German lines. But the military strength of France could never be fully restored during the war.

Pétain insisted that the only rational strategy was to keep to the defensive until new factors had changed the conditions sufficiently to justify taking the offensive with a reasonable hope of success. His constant advice was: "We must wait for the Americans and the tanks." Tanks were now being belatedly built in large numbers, and this emphasis on them showed a dawning recognition that machine warfare had superseded mass infantry warfare.

The U.S. entry into the war

After the rupture of diplomatic relations with Germany on February 3, 1917, events pushed the United States inexorably along the road to war. Using his authority as commander in chief, Wilson on March 9 ordered the arming of American merchant ships so that they could defend themselves against U-boat attacks. German submarines sank three U.S. merchant ships during March 16–18 with heavy loss of life. Supported by his Cabinet, by most newspapers, and by a large segment of public opinion, Wilson made the decision on March 20 for the United States to declare war on Germany, and on March 21 he called Congress to meet in special session on April 2. He delivered a ringing war message to that body, and the war resolution was approved by the Senate on April 3 and by the House of Representatives on April 6. The presidential declaration of war followed immediately.

Dill Pickle Club poster Poster advertising an antiwar dance (1918) sponsored by the Dill Pickle Club in Chicago.

The entry of the United States was the turning point of the war, because it made the eventual defeat of Germany possible. It had been foreseen in 1916 that if the United States went to war, the Allies' military effort against Germany would be upheld by U.S. supplies and by enormous extensions of credit. These expectations were amply and decisively fulfilled. The United States' production of armaments was to meet not only its own needs but also France's and Great Britain's. In this sense, the American economic contribution alone was decisive. By April 1, 1917, the Allies had exhausted their means of paying for essential supplies from the United States, and it is difficult to see how they could have maintained the war effort if the United States had remained neutral. American loans to the Allies worth $7,000,000,000 between 1917 and the end of the war maintained the flow of U.S. arms and food across the Atlantic.

Uncle Sam Army recruiting poster featuring Uncle Sam, designed by James Montgomery Flagg, 1917.

The American military contribution was as important as the economic one. A system of conscription was introduced by the Selective Service Act of May 18, 1917, but many months were required for the raising, training, and dispatch to Europe of an expeditionary force. There were still only 85,000 U.S. troops in France when the Germans launched their last great offensive in March 1918; but there were 1,200,000 there by the following September. The U.S. commander in Europe was General John J. Pershing.

The U.S. Navy was the second largest in the world when America entered the war in 1917. The Navy soon abandoned its plans for the construction of battleships and instead concentrated on building the destroyers and submarine chasers so desperately needed to protect Allied shipping from the U-boats. By July 1917 there were already 35 U.S. destroyers stationed at Queenstown (Cobh) on the coast of Ireland—enough to supplement British destroyers for a really effective transatlantic convoy system. By the end of the war there were more than 380 U.S. craft stationed overseas.

The U.S. declaration of war also set an example to other states in the Western Hemisphere. Cuba, Panama, Haiti, Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras were all at war with Germany by the end of July 1918, while the Dominican Republic, Peru, Uruguay, and Ecuador contented themselves with the severance of relations.

The Russian revolutions and the Eastern Front, March 1917–March 1918

The Russian Revolution of March (February, old style) 1917 put an end to the autocratic monarchy of imperial Russia and replaced it with a provisional government. But the latter's authority was at once contested by soviets, or "councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies," who claimed to represent the masses of the people and so to be the rightful conductors of the revolution. The March Revolution was an event of tremendous magnitude. Militarily it appeared to the western Allies as a disaster and to the Central Powers as a golden opportunity. The Russian Army remained in the field against the Central Powers, but its spirit was broken, and the Russian people were utterly tired of a war that the imperial regime for its own reasons had undertaken without being morally or materially prepared for it. The Russian Army had been poorly armed, poorly supplied, poorly trained, and poorly commanded and had suffered a long series of defeats. The soviets' propaganda—including the notorious Order No. 1 of the Petrograd Soviet (March 14, 1917), which called for committees of soldiers and sailors to take control of their units' arms and to ignore any opposition from their officers—served to subvert the remnants of discipline in troops who were already deeply demoralized.

World War I: U.S. Army recruits U.S. Army recruits at Camp Pike, Arkansas, in 1918, following the United States' entry into...(more)

World War I Woman working in an American airplane factory during World War I, 1917.

Russian Revolution Demonstrators gathering before the Winter Palace in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) in January ...(more)

But the leaders of the provisional government foresaw that a German victory in the war would bode ill for Russia in the future, and they were also conscious of their nation's obligations toward the western Allies. A.F. Kerensky, minister of war from May 1917, thought that a victorious offensive would enhance the new government's authority, besides relieving pressure on the Western Front. The offensive, however, which General L.G. Kornilov launched against the Austrians in eastern Galicia on July 1, 1917, was brought to a sudden halt by German reinforcements after 10 days of spectacular advances, and it turned into a catastrophic rout in the next three weeks. By October the advancing Germans had won control of most of Latvia and of the approaches to the Gulf of Finland.

Meanwhile, anarchy was spreading over Russia. The numerous non-Russian peoples of the former empire were one after another claiming autonomy or independence from Russia—whether spontaneously or at the prompting of the Germans in occupation of their countries. Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Poles were, by the end of 1917, all in various stages of the dissidence from which the independent states of the postwar period were to emerge; and, at the same time, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis were no less active in their own nationalist movements.

The provisional government's authority and influence were rapidly fading away in Russia proper during the late summer and autumn of 1917. The Bolshevik Revolution of November (October, O.S.) 1917 overthrew the provisional government and brought to power the Marxist Bolsheviks under the leadership of Vladimir I. Lenin. The Bolshevik Revolution spelled the end of Russia's participation in the war. Lenin's decree on land, of November 8, undermined the Eastern Front by provoking a homeward rush of soldiers anxious to profit from the expropriation of their former landlords. On November 8, likewise, Lenin issued his decree on peace, which offered negotiations to all belligerents but precluded annexations and indemnities and stipulated a right of self-determination for all peoples concerned. Finally, on November 26, the new Bolshevik government unilaterally ordered a cessation of hostilities both against the Central Powers and against the Turks.

An armistice between Lenin's Russia and the Central Powers was signed at Brest-Litovsk on December 15, 1917. The ensuing peace negotiations were complicated: on the one hand, Germany wanted peace in the east in order to be free to transfer troops thence to the Western Front, but Germany was at the same time concerned to exploit the principle of national self-determination in order to transfer as much territory as possible into its own safe orbit from that of revolutionary Russia. On the other hand, the Bolsheviks wanted peace in order to be free to consolidate their regime in the east with a view to being able to extend it westward as soon as the time should be ripe. When the Germans, despite the armistice, invaded Ukraine to cooperate with the Ukrainian nationalists against the Bolsheviks there and furthermore resumed their advance in the Baltic countries and in Belorussia, Lenin rejected his colleague Leon Trotsky's stopgap policy ("neither peace nor war") and accepted Germany's terms in order to save the Bolshevik Revolution. By the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918), Soviet Russia recognized Finland and Ukraine as independent;

renounced control over Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and most of Belorussia; and ceded Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi to Turkey.

Greek affairs

Greece's attitude toward the war was long uncertain: whereas King Constantine I and the general staff stood for neutrality, Eleuthérios Venizélos, leader of the Liberal Party, favoured the Allied cause. As prime minister from 1910, Venizélos wanted Greece to participate in the Allies' Dardanelles enterprise against Turkey in 1915, but his arguments were overruled by the general staff. The Allies occupied Lemnos and Lesbos regardless of Greece's neutrality. Constantine dismissed Venizélos from office twice in 1915, but Venizélos still commanded a majority in Parliament. The Bulgarians' occupation of Greek Macedonia in summer 1916 provoked another political crisis. Venizélos left Athens for Crete late in September, set up a government of his own there, and transferred it early in October to Salonika. On November 27 it declared war on Germany and Bulgaria. Finally, the Allies, on June 11, 1917, deposed King Constantine. Venizélos then returned to Athens to head a reunified Greek government, which on June 27 declared war on the Central Powers.

Caporetto

On the Italian front, Cadorna's 10th Battle of the Isonzo in May–June 1917 won very little ground; but his 11th, from August 17 to September 12, during which General Luigi Capello's 2nd Army captured much of the Bainsizza Plateau (Banjška Planota), north of Gorizia, strained Austrian resistance very severely. To avert an Austrian collapse, Ludendorff decided that the Austrians must take the offensive against Italy and that he could, with difficulty, lend them six German divisions for that purpose.

The offensive was boldly planned, very ably organized, and well executed. While two Austrian armies, under General Svetozar Borojević von Bojna, attacked the eastern end of the Italians' Venetian salient on the Bainsizza Plateau and on the low ground near the Adriatic shore, the German 14th Army, comprising the six German divisions and nine Austrian ones under Otto von Below, with Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen as his chief of staff, on October 24, 1917, began to force its way over the barrier of the Julian Alps at the northeastern corner of the Venetian salient, with Caporetto approximately opposite the middle point of the line. The Italians, completely surprised by this thrust, which threatened their forces both to the north and to the south, fell back in confusion: Below's van reached Udine, the former site of the Italian general headquarters, by October 28 and was on the Tagliamento River by October 31. Below's success had far exceeded the hopes of the planners of the offensive, and the Germans could not exploit their speedy advance as effectively as they wished. Cadorna, with his centre shattered, managed by precipitate retreat to save the wings of his army and was able, by November 9, to rally his remaining 300,000 troops behind the Piave River, north of Venice. The Italians had sustained about 500,000 casualties, and 250,000 more had been taken prisoner. General Armando Diaz was then appointed commander in chief in Cadorna's place. The Italians managed to hold the Piave front against direct assaults and against attempts to turn its left flank by an advance from the Trentino. The Italians' defense was helped by British and French reinforcements that had been rushed to Italy when the collapse began. A conference of the military and political leaders of the Allies was held at Rapallo in November, and out of this conference there sprang the joint Supreme War Council at Versailles, and ultimately a unified military command.

Mesopotamia, summer 1916–winter 1917

The British forces in Mesopotamia, neglected hitherto and discouraged by the disaster at al-Kūt (see above Mesopotamia, 1914–April 1916), received better attention from London in the second half of 1916; and Sir Frederick Stanley Maude, who became commander in chief in August, did so much to restore their morale that by December he was ready to undertake the recapture of al-Kūt as a first step toward capturing Baghdad.

By a series of outflanking movements, the British made their way gradually and methodically up the Tigris, compelling the Turks to extend their defenses upstream. When the final blow at al-Kūt was delivered by a frontal attack on February 22, 1917, British forces were already crossing the river from the west bank behind the town; but though al-Kūt fell two days later most of the Turkish garrison extricated itself from the threatened encirclement. Unable to hold a new line on the Diyālā River, the Turkish commander, Kâzim Karabekir, evacuated Baghdad, which the British entered on March 11. In September the British position in Baghdad was definitively secured by the capture of ar-Ramādī, on the Euphrates about 60 miles to the west; and early in November the main Turkish force in Mesopotamia was driven from Tikrīt, on the Tigris midway between Baghdad and Mosul.

Maude, having within a year changed the Mesopotamian scene from one of despair to one of victory, died of cholera on November 18, 1917. His successor in command was Sir William Marshall.

Palestine, autumn 1917

Having assumed command in Egypt (see above The Egyptian frontiers, 1915–July 1917), Allenby transferred his headquarters from Cairo to the Palestinian front and devoted the summer of 1917 to preparing a serious offensive against the Turks. On the Turkish side, Falkenhayn, now in command at Aleppo, was at this time himself planning a drive into the Sinai Peninsula for the autumn, but the British were able to strike first.

The Turkish front in southern Palestine extended from Gaza, on the coast, southeastward to Abu Hureira (Tel Haror) and thence to the stronghold of Beersheba. To disguise his real intention of achieving a breakthrough at Abu Hureira, for which, however, the capture of Beersheba was obviously prerequisite, Allenby began his operation with a heavy bombardment of Gaza from October 20 onward. When Beersheba had been seized by converging movements on October 31, a feint attack on Gaza was launched next day to draw the Turkish reserves thither. Then, the main attack, delivered on November 6, broke through the weakened defenses at Abu Hureira and into the plain of Philistia. Falkenhayn had attempted a counterstroke at Beersheba, but the collapse of the Turkish centre necessitated a general retreat. By November 14 the Turkish forces were split in two divergent groups, the port of Jaffa was taken, and Allenby wheeled his main force to the right for an advance inland on Jerusalem. On December 9 the British occupied Jerusalem.

The Western Front, June–December 1917

Pétain's decision to remain temporarily on the defensive after Nivelle's failure gave Haig the opportunity to fulfill his desire for a British offensive in Flanders. He took the first step on June 7, 1917, with a long-prepared attack on the Messines Ridge, north of Armentières, on the southern flank of his Ypres salient. This attack by General Sir Herbert Plumer's 2nd Army proved an almost complete success; it owed much to the surprise effect of 19 huge mines simultaneously fired after having been placed at the end of long tunnels under the German front lines. The capture of the ridge inflated Haig's confidence; and, though General Sir Hubert Gough, in command of the 5th Army, advocated a step-by-step method for the offensive, Haig committed himself to Plumer's view that they "go all out" for an early breakthrough. Haig disregarded the well-founded forecast that, from the beginning of August, rain would be turning the Flanders countryside into an almost impassable swamp. The Germans, meanwhile, were well aware that an offensive was coming from the Ypres salient: the flatness of the plain prevented any concealment of Haig's preparations, and a fortnight's intensive bombardment (4,500,000 shells from 3,000 guns) served to underline the obvious—without, however, destroying the German machine gunners' concrete pillboxes.

Thus, when the Third Battle of Ypres was begun, on July 31, only the left wing's objectives were achieved: on the crucial right wing the attack was a failure. Four days later, the ground was already swampy. When the attack was resumed on August 16, very little more was won, but Haig was still determined to persist in his offensive. Between September 20 and October 4, thanks to an improvement in the weather, the infantry was able to advance into positions cleared by bombardment, but no farther. Haig launched another futile attack on October 12, followed by three more attacks, scarcely more successful, in the last 10 days of October. At last, on November 6, when his troops advanced a very short distance and occupied the ruins of Passchendaele (Passendale), barely five miles beyond the starting point of his offensive, Haig felt that enough had been done. Having prophesied a decisive success without "heavy losses," he had lost 325,000 men and inflicted no comparable damage on the Germans.

Pétain, less pretentious and merely testing what might be done with his rehabilitated French Army, had at least as much to show for himself as Haig. In August the French 2nd Army under General M.-L.-A. Guillaumat fought the last battle of Verdun, winning back all the remainder of what had been lost to the Germans in 1916. In October General P.-A.-M. Maistre's 10th Army, in the Battle of Malmaison, took the ridge of the Chemin des Dames, north of the Aisne to the east of Soissons, where the front in Champagne joined the front in Picardy south of the Somme.

The British, at least, closed the year's campaign with an operation of some significance for the future. When the offensive from Ypres died out in the Flanders mud, they looked again at their tanks, of which they now had a considerable force but which they could hardly use profitably in the swamps. A Tank Corps officer, Colonel J.F.C. Fuller, had already suggested a large-scale raid on the front southwest of Cambrai, where a swarm of tanks, unannounced by any preparatory bombardment, could be released across

the rolling downland against the German trenches. This comparatively modest scheme might have been wholly successful if left unchanged, but the British command transformed it: Sir Julian Byng's 3rd Army was to actually try to capture Cambrai and to push on toward Valenciennes. On November 20, therefore, the attack was launched, with 324 tanks leading Byng's six divisions. The first massed assault of tanks in history took the Germans wholly by surprise, and the British achieved a far deeper penetration and at less cost than in any of their past offensives. Unfortunately, however, all of Byng's troops and tanks had been thrown into the first blow, and, as he was not reinforced in time, the advance came to a halt several miles short of Cambrai. A German counterstroke, on November 30, broke through on the southern flank of the new British salient and threatened Byng's whole army with disaster before being checked by a further British counterattack. In the end, three-quarters of the ground that the British had won was reoccupied by the Germans. Even so, the Battle of Cambrai had proved that surprise and the tank in combination could unlock the trench barrier.

The Far East

China's entry into the war in 1917 on the side of the Allies was motivated not by any grievance against the Central Powers but by the Peking government's fear lest Japan, a belligerent since 1914, should monopolize the sympathies of the Allies and of the United States when Far Eastern affairs came up for settlement after the war. Accordingly, in March 1917 the Peking government severed its relations with Germany; and on August 14 China declared war not only on Germany but also on the western Allies' other enemy, Austria-Hungary. China's contribution to the Allied war effort was to prove negligible in practical effects, however.

Naval operations, 1917–18

Since Germany's previous restrictions of its submarine warfare had been motivated by fear of provoking the United States into war, the U.S. declaration of war in April 1917 removed any reason for the Germans to retreat from their already declared policy of unrestricted warfare. Consequently, the U-boats, having sunk 181 ships in January, 259 in February, and 325 in March, sank 430 in April. The April sinkings represented 852,000 gross tons, to be compared both with the 600,000 postulated by the German strategists as their monthly target and with the 700,000 that the British in March had pessimistically foretold for June. The Germans had calculated that if the world's merchant shipping could be sunk at the monthly rate of 600,000 tons, the Allies, being unable to build new merchant ships fast enough to replace those lost, could not carry on the war for more than five months. At the same time, the Germans, who had 111 U-boats operational when the unrestricted campaign began, had embarked on an extensive building program that, when weighed against their current losses of one or two U-boats per month, promised a substantial net increase in the U-boats' numbers. During April, one in every four of the merchant ships that sailed from British ports was destined to be sunk, and by the end of May the quantity of shipping available to carry the vital foodstuffs and munitions to Great Britain had been reduced to only 6,000,000 tons.

The April total, however, proved to be a peak figure—primarily because the Allies at last adopted the convoy system for the protection of merchant ships. Previously, a ship bound for one of the Allies' ports had set sail by itself as soon as it was loaded. The sea was thus dotted with single and unprotected merchant ships, and a scouting U-boat could rely on several targets coming into its range in the course of a cruise. The convoy system remedied this by having groups of merchant ships sail within a protective ring of destroyers and other naval escorts. It was logistically possible and economically worthwhile to provide this kind of escort for a group of ships. Furthermore, the combination of convoy and escort would force the U-boat to risk the possibility of a counterattack in order to sink the merchant ships, thus giving the Allies a prospect of reducing the U-boats' numbers. Despite the manifest and seemingly overwhelming benefits of the convoy system, the idea was novel and, like any untried system, met with powerful opposition from within the military. It was only in the face of extreme necessity and under great pressure from Lloyd George that the system was tried, more or less as a last resort.

The first convoy sailed from Gibraltar to Great Britain on May 10, 1917; the first from the United States sailed later in May; ships using the South Atlantic sailed in convoy from July 22. During the later months of 1917 the use of convoys caused an abrupt fall in the sinkings by U-boats: 500,500 tons in May, 300,200 in September, and only about 200,600 in November. The convoy system was so quickly vindicated that in August it was extended to shipping outward-bound from Great Britain. The Germans themselves soon observed that the British had grasped the principles of antisubmarine warfare, and that sailing ships in convoys considerably reduced the opportunities for attack.

Apart from the convoys, the Allies improved their antisubmarine technology (hydrophones, depth charges, etc.) and extended their minefields. In 1918, moreover, Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, in command at Dover, set up a system whereby the English Channel was patrolled by surface craft with searchlights, so that U-boats passing through it had to submerge themselves to depths at which they were liable to strike the mines that had been laid for them. Subsequently, most of the U-boats renounced the Channel as a way into the Atlantic and instead took the passage north of Great Britain, thus losing precious fuel and time before reaching the heavily traveled sea lanes of the western approaches to Great Britain. In the summer of 1918, U.S. minelayers laid more than 60,000 mines (13,000 of them British) in a wide belt across 180 miles of the North Sea between Scotland and Norway, so as to obstruct the U-boats' only access from Germany to the Atlantic other than the closely guarded Channel.

The cumulative effect of all these measures was the gradual containment and ultimately the defeat of the U-boat campaign, which never again achieved the success of April 1917. While sinkings by submarines, after that month, steadily fell, the losses of U-boats showed a slow but steady rise, and more than 40 were destroyed in the first six months of 1918. At the same time the replacement of merchant vessels in the building program improved steadily, until it eventually far outstripped losses. In October 1918, for example, 511,000 tons of new Allied merchant ships were launched, while only 118,559 tons were lost.

Air warfare

At the start of the war the land and sea forces used the aircraft put at their disposal primarily for reconnaissance, and air fighting began as the exchange of shots from small arms between enemy airmen meeting one another in the course of reconnoitering. Fighter aircraft armed with machine guns, however, made their appearance in 1915. Tactical bombing and the bombing of enemy air bases were also gradually introduced at this time. Contact patrolling, with aircraft giving immediate support to infantry, was developed in 1916.

Strategic bombing, on the other hand, was initiated early enough: British aircraft from Dunkirk bombed Cologne, Düsseldorf, and Friedrichshafen in the autumn of 1914, their main objective being the sheds of the German dirigible airships, or Zeppelins; and raids by German airplanes or seaplanes on English towns in December 1914 heralded a great Zeppelin offensive sustained with increasing intensity from January 1915 to September 1916 (London was first bombed in the night of May 31–June 1, 1915). In October 1916 the British, in turn, began a more systematic offensive, from eastern France, against industrial targets in southwestern Germany.

While the British directed much of their new bombing strength to attacks on the bases of the U-boats, the Germans used theirs largely to continue the offensive against the towns of southeastern England. On June 13, 1917, in daylight, 14 German bombers dropped 118 high explosive bombs on London and returned home safely. This lesson and that of subsequent raids by the German Gotha bombers made the British think more seriously about strategic bombing and about the need for an air force independent of the other fighting services. The Royal Air Force (RAF), the world's first separate air service, was brought into active existence by a series of measures taken between October 1917 and June 1918.

Peace moves, March 1917–September 1918

Until the end of 1916, the pursuit of peace was confined to individuals and to small groups. In the following months it began to acquire a broad popular backing. Semi-starvation in towns, mutinies in the armies, and casualty lists that seemed to have no end made more and more people question the need and the wisdom of continuing the war.

Francis Joseph, Austria's venerable old emperor, died on November 21, 1916. The new emperor, Charles I, and his foreign minister, Graf Ottokar Czernin, initiated peace moves in the spring of 1917 but unfortunately did not concert their diplomatic efforts, and the channels of negotiation they opened between Austria-Hungary and the Allies had dried up by that summer.

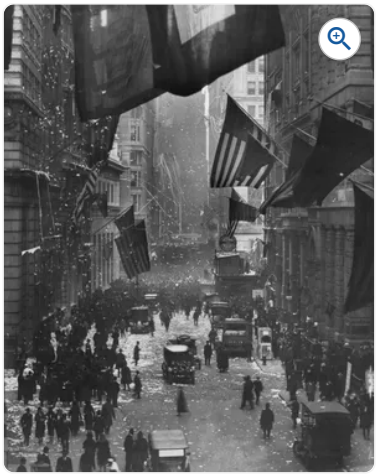
In Germany, Matthias Erzberger, a Roman Catholic member of the Reichstag, had, on July 6, 1917, proposed that territorial annexations be renounced in order to facilitate a negotiated peace. During the ensuing debates Bethmann Hollweg resigned the office of chancellor, and the emperor William II appointed the next chancellor, Ludendorff's nominee Georg Michaelis, without consulting the Reichstag. The Reichstag, offended, proceeded to pass its *Friedensresolution*, or "peace resolution," of July 19 by 212 votes. The peace resolution was a string of innocuous phrases expressing Germany's desire for peace but without a clear renunciation of annexations or indemnities. The Allies took almost no notice of it.

Erzberger's proposal of July 6 had been intended to pave the way for Pope Benedict XV's forthcoming note to the belligerents of both camps. Dated August 1, 1917, this note advocated a German withdrawal from Belgium and from France, the Allies' withdrawal from the German colonies, and the restoration not only of Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania but also of Poland to independence. France and Great Britain declined to give an express reply pending Germany's statement of its attitude about Belgium, on which Germany avoided committing itself.

An unofficial peace move was made in London: on November 29, 1917, the *Daily Telegraph* published a letter from Lord Lansdowne suggesting negotiations on the basis of the status quo antebellum. Lloyd George rejected Lansdowne's theses on December 14.

The U.S. president Woodrow Wilson made himself the chief formulator and spokesman of the war aims of the Allies and the United States. The first nine months of 1918 saw Wilson's famous series of pronouncements on his war aims: the Fourteen Points (January 8), the "Four Principles" (February 11), the "Four Ends" (July 4), and the "Five Particulars" (September 27). Most important, not least because of Germany's deluded reliance on them in its eventual suing for peace, were the Fourteen Points: (1) open covenants of peace and the renunciation of secret diplomacy, (2) freedom of navigation on the high seas in wartime as well as peace, (3) the maximum possible freedom of trade, (4) a guaranteed reduction of armaments, (5) an impartial colonial settlement accommodating not only the colonialist powers but also the peoples of the colonies, (6) the evacuation of all Russian territory and respect for Russia's right of self-determination, (7) the complete restoration of Belgium, (8) a complete German withdrawal from France and satisfaction for France about Alsace-Lorraine, (9) a readjustment of Italy's frontiers on an ethnic basis, (10) an open prospect of autonomy for the peoples of Austria-Hungary, (11) the restoration of Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro, with free access to the sea for Serbia and international guarantees of the Balkan states' independence and integrity, (12) the prospect of autonomy for non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman Empire and the unrestricted opening of the Straits, but secure sovereignty for the Turks in their own areas, (13) an independent Poland with access to the sea and under international guarantee, and (14) "a general association of nations," to guarantee the independence and integrity of all states, great and small. The three subsequent groups of pronouncements mainly consisted of idealistic expansions of themes implicit in the Fourteen Points, with increasing emphasis on the wishes of subject populations; but the first of the "Four Ends" was that every arbitrary power capable by itself of disturbing world peace should be rendered innocuous.

Wilson's peace campaign was a significant factor in the collapse of the will to fight of the German people and the decision of the German government to sue for peace in October 1918. Indeed, the Germans conducted their preliminary peace talks exclusively with Wilson. And the Armistice, when it came on November 11, 1918, was formally based upon the Fourteen Points and additional Wilsonian pronouncements, with two reservations by the British and French relating to freedom of the seas and reparations.



Celebrating the end of World War I Crowds on Wall Street celebrating the end of World War I, New York City, 1918.

The last offensives and the Allies' victory

The Western Front, March–September 1918

As the German strength on the Western Front was being steadily increased by the transfer of divisions from the Eastern Front (where they were no longer needed since Russia had withdrawn from the war), the Allies' main problem was how to withstand an imminent German offensive pending the arrival of massive reinforcements from the United States. Eventually Pétain persuaded the reluctant Haig that the British with 60 divisions should extend their sector of the front from 100 to 125 miles as compared with the 325 miles to be held by the French with approximately 100 divisions. Haig thus devoted 46 of his divisions to the front from the

Channel to Gouzeaucourt (southwest of German-held Cambrai) and 14 to the remaining third of the front from Gouzeaucourt past German-held Saint-Quentin to the Oise River.

On the German side, between November 1, 1917, and March 21, 1918, the German divisions on the Western Front were increased from 146 to 192, the troops being drawn from Russia, Galicia, and Italy. By these means the German armies in the west were reinforced by a total of about 570,000 men. Ludendorff's interest was to strike from his temporary position of strength—before the arrival of the major U.S. contingents—and at the same time to ensure that his German offensive should not fail for the same reasons as the Allies' offensives of the past three years. Accordingly he formed an offensive strategy based on taking the tactical line of least resistance. The main German attacks would begin with brief but extremely intense artillery bombardments using a high proportion of poison gas and smoke shells. These would incapacitate the Allies' forward trenches and machine-gun emplacements and would obscure their observation posts. Then a second and lighter artillery barrage would begin to creep forward over the Allied trenches at a walking pace (in order to keep the enemy under fire), with the masses of German assault infantry advancing as closely as possible behind it. The key to the new tactics was that the assault infantry would bypass machine-gun nests and other points of strong resistance instead of waiting, as had been the previous practice on both sides, for reinforcements to mop up the obstructions before continuing the advance. The Germans would instead continue to advance in the direction of the least enemy resistance. The mobility of the German advance would thus be assured, and its deep infiltration would result in large amounts of territory being taken.

Such tactics demanded exceptionally fit and disciplined troops and a high level of training. Ludendorff accordingly drew the best troops from all the Western Front forces at his disposal and formed them into elite shock divisions. The troops were systematically trained in the new tactics, and every effort was also made to conceal the actual areas at which the German main attacks would be made.

Ludendorff's main attack was to be on the weakest sector of the Allies' front, the 47 miles between Arras and La Fère (on the Oise). Two German armies, the 17th and the 2nd, were to break through the front between Arras and Saint-Quentin, north of the Somme, and then wheel right so as to force most of the British back toward the Channel, while the 18th Army, between the Somme and the Oise, protected the left flank of the advance against counterattack from the south. Code-named "Michael," this offensive was to be supplemented by three other attacks: "St. George I" against the British on the Lys River south of Armentières; "St. George II" against the British again between Armentières and Ypres; and "Blücher" against the French in Champagne. It was finally decided to use 62 divisions in the main attack, "Michael."

Preceded by an artillery bombardment using 6,000 guns, "Michael" was launched on March 21, 1918, and was helped by an early morning fog that hid the German advance from the Allied observation posts. The attack, which is known as the Second Battle of the Somme or the Battle of Saint-Quentin, took the British altogether by surprise, but it did not develop as Ludendorff had foreseen. While the 18th Army under von Hutier achieved a complete breakthrough south of the Somme, the major attack to the north was held up, mainly by the British concentration of strength at Arras. For a whole week Ludendorff, in violation of his new tactical emphasis, vainly persisted in trying to carry out his original plan instead of exploiting the unexpected success of the 18th Army, though the latter had advanced more than 40 miles westward and had reached Montdidier by March 27. At last, however, the main effort of the Germans was converted into a drive toward Amiens, which began in force on March 30. By that time the Allies had recovered from their initial dismay, and French reserves were coming up to the British line. The German drive was halted east of Amiens and so too was a renewed attack on April 4. Ludendorff then suspended his Somme offensive. This offensive had yielded the largest territorial gains of any operation on the Western Front since the First Battle of the Marne in September 1914.

The Allies' cause at least derived one overdue benefit from the collapse of one-third of the British front: at Haig's own suggestion, Foch was on March 26 appointed to coordinate the Allies' military operations; and on April 14 he was named commander in chief of the Allied armies. Previously, Haig had resisted the idea of a generalissimo.

On April 9 the Germans began "St. George I" with an attack on the extreme northern front between Armentières and the canal of La Bassée, their aim being to advance across the Lys River toward Hazebrouck. Such was the initial success of this attack that "St. George II" was launched the next day, with the capture of Kemmel Hill (Kemmelberg), southwest of Ypres, as its first objective. Armentières fell, and Ludendorff came to think for a time that this Battle of the Lys might be turned into a major effort. The British, however, after being driven back 10 miles, halted the Germans short of Hazebrouck. French reinforcements began to come up; and,

when the Germans had taken Kemmel Hill (April 25), Ludendorff decided to suspend exploitation of the advance, for fear of a counterstroke against his front's new bulge.

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Thus far Ludendorff had fallen short of strategic results, but he could claim huge tactical successes—the British casualties alone amounted to more than 300,000. Ten British divisions had to be broken up temporarily, while the German strength mounted to 208 divisions, of which 80 were still in reserve. A restoration of the balance, however, was now in sight. A dozen U.S. divisions had arrived in France, and great efforts were being made to swell the stream. Furthermore, Pershing, the U.S. commander, had placed his troops at Foch's disposal for use wherever required.

Ludendorff finally launched "Blücher" on May 27, on a front extending from Coucy, north of Soissons, eastward toward Reims. The Germans, with 15 divisions, suddenly attacked the seven French and British divisions opposing them, swarmed over the ridge of the Chemin des Dames and across the Aisne River, and, by May 30, were on the Marne, between Château-Thierry and Dormans. Once again the attack's initial success went far beyond Ludendorff's expectation or intention; and, when the Germans tried to push westward against the right flank of the Allies' Compiègne salient, which was sandwiched between the Germans' Amiens and Champagne bulges, they were checked by counterattacks, which included one sustained for a fortnight from June 6 by U.S. divisions at Belleau Wood (Bois de Belleau). An attack from Noyon, against the left flank of the Compiègne salient, came too late (June 9).

Overtaken by the inordinate fruition of his own offensives, Ludendorff paused for a month's recuperation. The tactical success of his own blows had been his undoing; yielding to their influence, he had pressed each too far and too long, using up his own reserves and causing an undue interval between blows. He had driven three great wedges into the Allied lines, but none had penetrated far enough to sever a vital rail artery, and this strategic failure left the Germans with a front whose several bulges invited flanking counterstrokes. Moreover, Ludendorff had used up many of his shock troops in the attacks, and the remaining troops, though strong in numbers, were relatively lower in quality. The Germans were to end up sustaining a total of 800,000 casualties in their great 1918 offensives. Meanwhile, the Allies were now receiving U.S. troops at the rate of 300,000 men per month.

Marne, Battle of the Engineers of the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division preparing to cross the Marne River near Mézy, France, July 1918.

The next German offensive, which opened the Second Battle of the Marne, was launched in Champagne on July 15. It came to nothing: a German thrust from the front east of Reims toward Châlons-sur-Marne was frustrated by the "elastic defense" that Pétain had recently been prescribing but that the local commanders had failed to practice against the offensive of May 27. A drive from Dormans, on the left flank of the Germans' huge Soissons–Reims bulge, across the Marne toward Épernay simply made the Germans' situation more precarious when Foch's long-prepared counterstroke was launched on July 18. In this great counterstroke one of Foch's armies assailed the Germans' Champagne bulge from the west, another from the southwest, one more from the south, and a fourth from the vicinity of Reims. Masses of light tanks—a weapon on which Ludendorff had placed little reliance, preferring gas instead in his plans for the year—played a vital part in forcing the Germans into a hasty retreat. By August 2 the French had pushed the Champagne front back to a line following the Vesle River from Reims and then along the Aisne to a point west of Soissons.

Having recovered the initiative, the Allies were determined not to lose it, and for their next blow they chose again the front north and south of the Somme. The British 4th Army, including Australian and Canadian forces, with 450 tanks, struck the Germans with maximum surprise on August 8, 1918. Overwhelming the German forward divisions, who had failed to entrench themselves adequately since their recent occupation of the "Michael" bulge, the 4th Army advanced steadily for four days, taking 21,000 prisoners and inflicting as many or more casualties at the cost of only about 20,000 casualties to itself, and halting only when it reached the desolation of the old battlefields of 1916. Several German divisions simply collapsed in the face of the offensive, their troops either fleeing or surrendering. The Battle of Amiens was thus a striking material and moral success for the Allies. Ludendorff put it differently: "August 8 was the black day of the German Army in the history of the war....It put the decline of our fighting power beyond all doubt....The war must be ended." He informed Emperor William II and Germany's political chiefs that peace negotiations should be opened before the situation became worse, as it must. The conclusions reached at a German Crown Council held at Spa were that "We can no longer hope to break the war-will of our enemies by military operations," and "the objects of our

strategy must be to paralyse the enemy's war-will gradually by a strategic defensive." In other words, the German high command had abandoned hope of victory or even of holding their gains and hoped only to avoid surrender.

Meanwhile, the French had retaken Montdidier and were thrusting toward Lassigny (between Roye and Noyon); and on August 17 they began a new drive from the Compiègne salient south of Noyon. Then, in the fourth week of August, two more British armies went into action on the Arras–Albert sector of the front, the one advancing directly eastward on Bapaume, the other operating farther to the north. From then on Foch delivered a series of hammer blows along the length of the German front, launching a series of rapid attacks at different points, each broken off as soon as its initial impetus waned, and all close enough in time to attract German reserves, which consequently were unavailable to defend against the next Allied attack along a different part of the front. By the early days of September the Germans were back where they had been before March 1918—behind the Hindenburg Line.

The Allies' recovery was consummated by the first feat executed by Pershing's U.S. forces as an independent army (hitherto the U.S. divisions in France had fought only in support of the major French or British units): the U.S. 1st Army on September 12 erased the triangular Saint-Mihiel salient that the Germans had been occupying since 1914 (between Verdun and Nancy).

The clear evidence of the Germans' decline decided Foch to seek victory in the coming autumn of 1918 instead of postponing the attempt until 1919. All the Allied armies in the west were to combine in a simultaneous offensive.

Other developments in 1918

Czechs, Yugoslavs, and Poles

Something must now be said about the growth of the national movements, which, under the eventual protection of the Allies, were to result in the foundation of new states or the resurrection of long-defunct ones at the end of the war. There were three such movements: that of the Czechs, with the more backward Slovaks in tow; that of the South Slavs, or Yugoslavs (Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes); and that of the Poles. The Czech country, namely Bohemia and Moravia, belonged in 1914 to the Austrian half of the Habsburg monarchy, the Slovak to the Hungarian half. The Yugoslavs had already been represented in 1914 by two independent kingdoms, Serbia and Montenegro, but they were also predominantly numerous in territories still under Habsburg rule: Serbs in Bosnia and Hercegovina (an Austro-Hungarian condominium) and in Dalmatia (an Austrian possession); Croats in Croatia (Hungarian), in Istria (Austrian), and in Dalmatia; Slovenes in Istria and in Illyria (Austrian likewise). Poland was divided into three parts: Germany had the north and the west as provinces of the Kingdom of Prussia; Austria had Galicia (including an ethnically Ukrainian extension to the east); Russia had the rest.

The Czechs had long been restless under the Austrian regime, and one of their leading intellectual spokesmen, Tomáš Masaryk (in fact a Slovak), had already envisaged the carving of Czechoslovak and Yugoslav states out of Austria-Hungary in December 1914. In 1916 he and a fellow émigré, Edvard Beneš, based respectively in London and in Paris, organized a Czechoslovak National Council. The western Allies committed themselves to the Czechoslovak idea from 1917 onward, when Russia's imminent defection from the war made them ready to exploit any means at hand for the disabling of Austria-Hungary; and Wilson's sympathy was implicit in his successive peace pronouncements of 1918.

For the South Slavs of Austria-Hungary the Yugoslav Committee, with representatives in Paris and in London, was founded in April 1915. On July 20, 1917, this committee and the Serbian government in exile made the joint Corfu Declaration forecasting a South Slav state to comprise Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

The Polish nationalist leaders in the first years of the war were uncertain whether to rely on the Central Powers or on the Allies for a restoration of Poland's independence. So long as the western Allies hesitated to encourage Polish nationalism for fear of offending imperial Russia, the Central Powers seemed to be the most likely sponsors; and Austria at least allowed Józef Piłsudski, from 1914, to organize his volunteer Polish legions to serve with Austrian forces against the Russians. Austria's benevolence, however, was not reflected by Germany; and when the Two Emperors' Manifesto of November 5, 1916, provided for the constitution of an independent Polish kingdom, it was clear that this kingdom would consist only of Polish territory conquered from Russia, not of any German or Austrian territory. When, after the March Revolution of 1917, the Russian provisional government had recognized Poland's right to independence, Roman Dmowski's Polish National Committee, which from 1914 had been functioning in a limited way under Russian protection, could at last count seriously on the sympathy of the western Allies. While Piłsudski declined to raise a Polish army to fight on against the new Russia, a Polish army was formed in France, as well as two army corps in Belorussia and in

Ukraine, to fight against the Central Powers. The Bolshevik Revolution and Wilson's Fourteen Points together consummated the alignment of the Poles on the side of the western powers.

Eastern Europe and the Russian periphery, March–November 1918

Treaties of Brest-Litovsk Delegates at negotiations for the treaties of Brest-Litovsk, 1918.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918) gave Germany a free hand to do what it liked with Russia's former possessions in eastern Europe. While they pursued their plan of 1916 for a kingdom of Poland, the Germans took new measures for the other countries. Lithuania, recognized as independent, was to be a kingdom under some German prince. Latvia and Estonia were to be merged into a grand duchy of the Baltikum under the hereditary rule of Prussia. An expeditionary force of 12,000 men, under General Graf Rüdiger von der Goltz, was sent to Finland to uphold the Finnish general C.G.E. Mannerheim's nationalist forces against the Red Guards, whom the Bolsheviks, despite their recognition of Finland's independence, were now promoting there. And finally, the Ukrainian nationalist government, which had already been challenged by a Communist one before its separate peace with the Central Powers (Brest-Litovsk, February 9), was promptly displaced by a new regime after the advance of German and Austro-Hungarian troops into its territory.

The Romanian armistice of December 1917 was converted into the Treaty of Bucharest on May 7, 1918. Under this treaty's terms, southern Dobruja was ceded to Bulgaria; northern Dobruja was put under the joint administration of the Central Powers; and the latter obtained virtual control of Romania's oil fields and communications. Romania, on the other hand, had some consolation from Bessarabia, whose nationalists, after receiving Romanian assistance against the Bolsheviks, had voted in March 1918 for their country's conditional union with Romania.

Even Transcaucasia began to slide into the German camp. The short-lived federal republic was dissolved by its three members' individual declarations of independence—Georgia's on May 26, Armenia's and Azerbaijan's on May 28. Treaties of friendship were promptly signed between Georgia and Germany and between Armenia and Turkey, and Turkish troops advanced into Azerbaijan, where they occupied Baku on September 15. The western Allies, meanwhile, were hoping that some new semblance of an Eastern Front could be conjured up if they supported the various and growing forces in Russia that were opposed to the peacemaking Bolsheviks. Since the Black Sea and the Baltic were closed to them, the Allies could land troops only on Russia's Arctic and Pacific shores. Thus, the Allied "intervention" in Russia on the side of the anti-Bolshevik ("White") forces, long to be execrated by Soviet historians, began with an Anglo-French landing at Murmansk, in the far north, on March 9, 1918. The subsequent reinforcement of Murmansk made possible the occupation of the Murmansk railway as far south as Soroka (now Belomorsk); and a further landing at Arkhangelsk in the summer raised the total Allied strength in northern Russia to some 48,000 (including 20,000 Russian "Whites"). By this time, moreover, there were some 85,000 interventionist troops in Siberia, where a strong Japanese landing at Vladivostok in April had been followed by British, French, Italian, and U.S. contingents. A "White" provisional government of Russia was set up at Omsk, with Admiral A.V. Kolchak as its dominant personality. The "White" resistance in the south of European Russia, which had been growing since November 1917, was put under the supreme command of General A.I. Denikin in April 1918.

The Balkan front, 1918

At Salonika the Allies' politically ambitious but militarily ineffective commander in chief, General Sarrail, was replaced at the end of 1917 by General Guillaumat, who was in turn succeeded in July 1918 by General L.-F.-F. Franchet d'Esperey, who launched a major offensive in September with six Serbian and two French divisions against a seven-mile front held by only one Bulgarian division.

The initial assault, preceded by heavy bombardment at night, began in the morning of September 15, 1918, and a five-mile penetration was achieved by nightfall on September 16. The next day the Serbs advanced 20 miles forward, while French and Greek forces on their flanks widened the breach to 25 miles. A British attack, launched on September 18 on the front between the Vardar and Lake Doiran, prevented the Bulgars from transferring troops westward against the right flank of the penetration; and by September 19 the Serbian cavalry had reached Kavadarci, at the apex of the Crna–Vardar triangle. Two days later the whole Bulgarian front west of the Vardar had collapsed.

While Italian forces in the extreme west advanced on Prilep, the elated Serbs, with the French beside them, pressed on up the Vardar Valley. The British in the east now made such headway as to take Strumica, across the old Bulgarian frontier, on September 26. The Bulgars then sued for an armistice; and on September 29, when a bold French cavalry thrust up the Vardar from Veles (Titov Veles) took Skopje, key to the whole system of communications for the Balkan front, Bulgarian delegates signed the Armistice of Salonika, accepting the Allies' terms unreservedly.

The Turkish fronts, 1918

The British–Turkish front in Palestine in the summer of 1918 ran from the Jordan River westward north of Jericho and Lydda to the Mediterranean just north of Jaffa. North of this front there were three Turkish "armies" (in fact, barely stronger than divisions): one to the east of the Jordan, two to the west. These armies depended for their supplies on the Hejaz Railway, the main line of which ran from Damascus southward, east of the Jordan, and which was joined at Déraa (Darʿā) by a branch line serving Palestine.

Liman von Sanders, Falkenhayn's successor as commander of the Turkish forces in Syria–Palestine, was convinced that the British would make their main effort east of the Jordan. Allenby, however, was really interested in taking a straight northerly direction, reckoning that the Palestine branch rail line at ʿAfula and Beisān, some 60 miles behind the Turkish front, could be reached by a strategic "bound" of his cavalry and that their fall would isolate the two Turkish armies in the west.

Having by ruse and diversion induced the Turks to reduce their strength in the west, Allenby struck there on September 19, 1918, with a numerical superiority of 10 to one. In this Battle of Megiddo, a British infantry attack swept the astonished defenders aside and opened the way for the cavalry, which rode 30 miles north up the coastal corridor before swinging inland to cut the Turks' northward lines of retreat. ʿAfula, Beisān, and even Nazareth, farther north, were in British hands the next day.

When the Turks east of the Jordan River began to retreat on September 22, the Arabs had already severed the railway line and were lying in wait for them; and a British cavalry division from Beisān was also about to push eastward to intercept their withdrawal. Simultaneously, two more British divisions and another force of Arabs were racing on toward Damascus, which fell on October 1. The campaign ended with the capture of Aleppo and the junction of the Baghdad Railway. In 38 days Allenby's forces had advanced 350 miles and taken 75,000 prisoners at a cost of less than 5,000 casualties.

In Mesopotamia, meanwhile, the British had taken Kifrī, north of the Diyālā left-bank tributary of the Tigris, in January 1918, and Khān al-Baghdāḥī, up the Euphrates, in March. Pressing northward from Kifrī, they took Kirkūk in May but soon evacuated it.

The British centre in Mesopotamia, advancing up the Tigris in October, was about to capture Mosul when the hostilities were suspended. The Ottoman government, seeing eastern Turkey defenseless and fearing an Allied advance against Istanbul from the west now that Bulgaria had collapsed, decided to capitulate. On October 30 the Armistice of Mudros was signed, on a British cruiser off Lemnos. The Turks, by its terms, were to open the Straits to the Allies; demobilize their forces; allow the Allies to occupy any strategic point that they might require and to use all Turkey's ports and railways; and order the surrender of their remaining garrisons in Arabia, Syria, and Mesopotamia. The centuries-old Ottoman Empire had come to an end.

Vittorio Veneto

After the stabilization of the Italian front on the Piave River at the end of 1917, the Austrians made no further move until the following June. They then tried not only to force the Tonale Pass and enter northeastern Lombardy but also to make two converging thrusts into central Venetia, the one southeastward from the Trentino, the other southwestward across the lower Piave. The whole offensive came to worse than nothing, the attackers losing 100,000 men.

Diaz, the Italian commander in chief, was meanwhile deliberately abstaining from positive action until Italy should be ready to strike with success assured. In the offensive he planned, three of the five armies lining the front from the Monte Grappa sector to the Adriatic end of the Piave were to drive across the river toward Vittorio Veneto, so as to cut communications between the two Austrian armies opposing them.

When Germany, in October 1918, was at last asking for an armistice (see below The end of the German war), Italy's time had obviously come. On October 24, the anniversary of Caporetto, the offensive opened. An attack in the Monte Grappa sector was repulsed with heavy loss, though it served to attract the Austrian reserves, and the flooding of the Piave prevented two of the three central armies from advancing simultaneously with the third; but the latter, comprising one Italian and one British corps, having

under cover of darkness and fog occupied Papadopoli Island farther downstream, won a foothold on the left bank of the river on October 27. The Italian reserves were then brought up to exploit this bridgehead.

Mutiny was already breaking out in the Austrian forces, and on October 28 the Austrian high command ordered a general retreat. Vittorio Veneto was occupied the next day by the Italians, who were also pushing on already toward the Tagliamento. On November 3 the Austrians obtained an armistice (see below).

The collapse of Austria-Hungary

The duality of the Habsburg monarchy had been underlined from the very beginning of the war. Whereas the Austrian parliament, or Reichsrat, had been suspended in March 1914 and was not reconvened for three years, the Hungarian parliament in Budapest continued its sessions, and the Hungarian government proved itself constantly less amenable to dictation from the military than had the Austrian. The Slav minorities, however, showed little sign of anti-Habsburg feeling before Russia's March Revolution of 1917. In May 1917, however, the Reichsrat was reconvened, and just before the opening session the Czech intelligentsia sent a manifesto to its deputies calling for "a democratic Europe…of autonomous states." The Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 and the Wilsonian peace pronouncements from January 1918 onward encouraged socialism, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other, or alternatively a combination of both tendencies, among all peoples of the Habsburg monarchy.

Early in September 1918 the Austro-Hungarian government proposed in a circular note to the other powers that a conference be held on neutral territory for a general peace. This proposal was quashed by the United States on the ground that the U.S. position had already been enunciated by the Wilsonian pronouncements (the Fourteen Points, etc.). But when Austria-Hungary, after the collapse of Bulgaria, appealed on October 4 for an armistice based on those very pronouncements, the answer on October 18 was that the U.S. government was now committed to the Czechoslovaks and to the Yugoslavs, who might not be satisfied with the "autonomy" postulated heretofore. The emperor Charles had, in fact, granted autonomy to the peoples of the Austrian Empire (as distinct from the Hungarian Kingdom) on October 16, but this concession was ignored internationally and served only to facilitate the process of disruption within the monarchy: Czechoslovaks in Prague and South Slavs in Zagreb had already set up organs ready to take power.

The last scenes of Austria-Hungary's dissolution were performed very rapidly. On October 24 (when the Italians launched their very timely offensive), a Hungarian National Council prescribing peace and severance from Austria was set up in Budapest. On October 27 a note accepting the U.S. note of October 18 was sent from Vienna to Washington—to remain unacknowledged. On October 28 the Czechoslovak committee in Prague passed a "law" for an independent state, while a similar Polish committee was formed in Kraków for the incorporation of Galicia and Austrian Silesia into a unified Poland. On October 29, while the Austrian high command was asking the Italians for an armistice, the Croats in Zagreb declared Slavonia, Croatia, and Dalmatia to be independent, pending the formation of a national state of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. On October 30 the German members of the Reichsrat in Vienna proclaimed an independent state of German Austria.

The solicited armistice between the Allies and Austria-Hungary was signed at the Villa Giusti, near Padua, on November 3, 1918, to become effective on November 4. Under its provisions, Austria-Hungary's forces were required to evacuate not only all territory occupied since August 1914 but also South Tirol, Tarvisio, the Isonzo Valley, Gorizia, Trieste, Istria, western Carniola, and Dalmatia. All German forces should be expelled from Austria-Hungary within 15 days or interned, and the Allies were to have free use of Austria-Hungary's internal communications and to take possession of most of its warships.

Count Mihály Károlyi, chairman of the Budapest National Council, had been appointed prime minister of Hungary by his king, the Austrian emperor Charles, on October 31 but had promptly started to dissociate his country from Austria—partly in the vain hope of obtaining a separate Hungarian armistice. Charles, the last Habsburg to rule in Austria-Hungary, renounced the right to participate in Austrian affairs of government on November 11, in Hungarian affairs on November 13.

The final offensive on the Western Front

It was eventually agreed among the Allied commanders that Pershing's American troops should advance across the difficult terrain of the Argonne Forest, so that the combined Allied offensive would consist of converging attacks against the whole German position west of a line drawn from Ypres to Verdun. Thus, the Americans from the front northwest of Verdun and the French from eastern Champagne, the former on the west bank of the Meuse, the latter west of the Argonne Forest, were to launch attacks on September

26, with Mézières as their objective, in order to threaten not only the Germans' supply line along the Mézières–Sedan–Montmédy railway and the natural line of retreat across Lorraine but also the hinge of the Antwerp–Meuse defensive line that the Germans were now preparing. The British were to attack the Hindenburg Line between Cambrai and Saint-Quentin on September 27 and to try to reach the key rail junction of Maubeuge, so as to threaten the Germans' line of retreat through the Liège gap. The Belgians, with Allied support, were to begin a drive from Ypres toward Ghent on September 28.

The Americans took Vauquois and Montfaucon in the first two days of their offensive but were soon slowed down, and on October 14, when their attack was suspended, they had only reached Grandpré, less than halfway to Mézières. The French advance meanwhile was halted on the Aisne. The British, though they had broken through the German defenses by October 5 and thenceforward had open country in front of them, could not pursue the Germans fast enough to endanger their withdrawal. Nevertheless, the piercing of the Hindenburg Line unnerved the German supreme command. The Belgians were in possession of all the heights around Ypres by September 30.

Cloth Hall after the Battle of Ypres British troops passing through the ruins of Ypres, West Flanders, Belg..(more)

The end of the German war

Georg von Hertling, who had taken the place of Michaelis as Germany's chancellor in November 1917 but had proved no more capable than he of restraining Ludendorff and Hindenburg, tendered his resignation on September 29, 1918, the day of the Bulgarian armistice and of the major development of the British attack on the Western Front. Pending the appointment of a new chancellor, Ludendorff and Hindenburg obtained the Emperor's consent to an immediate peace move. On October 1 they even disclosed their despondency to a meeting of the leaders of all the national political parties, thus undermining the German home front by a sudden revelation of facts long hidden from the public and its civilian leaders. This new and bleak honesty about Germany's deteriorating military situation gave an immense impetus to the native German forces of pacifism and internal discord. On October 3 the new chancellor was appointed: he was Prince Maximilian of Baden, internationally known for his moderation and honorability. Though Max demanded a few days' interval lest Germany's overture for peace should appear too obviously an admission of imminent collapse, the military leaders insisted on an immediate move. A German note to Wilson, requesting an armistice and negotiations on the basis of Wilson's own pronouncements, was sent off in the night of October 3–4.

The U.S. answer of October 8 required Germany's preliminary assent (1) to negotiations on the sole question of the means of putting Wilson's principles into practice and (2) to the withdrawal of German forces from Allied soil. The German government's note of October 12 accepted these requirements and suggested a mixed commission to arrange the postulated evacuation. On October 14, however, the U.S. government sent a second note, which coupled allusions to Germany's "illegal and inhuman" methods of warfare with demands that the conditions of the armistice and of the evacuation be determined unilaterally by its own and the Allies' military advisers and that the "arbitrary power" of the German regime be removed in order that the forthcoming negotiations could be conducted with a government representative of the German people.

By this time the German supreme command had become more cheerful, even optimistic, as it saw that the piercing of the Hindenburg Line had not been followed by an actual Allied breakthrough. More encouragement came from reports of a slackening in the force of the Allies' attacks, largely because they had advanced too far ahead of their supply lines. Ludendorff still wanted an armistice, but only to give his troops a rest as a prelude to further resistance and to ensure a secure withdrawal to a shortened defensive line on the frontier. By October 17 he even felt that his troops could do without a rest. It was less that the situation had changed than that his impression of it had been revised; it had never been quite so bad as he had pictured it on September 29. But his dismal first impression had now spread throughout German political circles and the public. Though they had endured increasing privations and were half-starved due to the Allied blockade by mid-1918, the German people had retained their morale surprisingly well as long as they believed Germany had a prospect of achieving victory on the Western Front. When this hope collapsed in October 1918, many, and perhaps even most, Germans wished only that the war would end, though it might mean their nation would have to accept unfavourable peace terms. German public opinion, having been more suddenly disillusioned, was now far more radically defeatist than the supreme command.

A third German note to the United States, sent on October 20, agreed to the unilateral settlement of conditions for the armistice and for the evacuation, in the express belief that Wilson would allow no affront to Germany's honour. The answering U.S. note of October 23 conceded Wilson's readiness to propose an armistice to the Allies but added that the terms must be such as to make Germany incapable of renewing hostilities. Ludendorff saw this, militarily, as a demand for unconditional surrender and would therefore have continued resistance. But the situation had passed beyond his control, and on October 26 he was made to resign by the Emperor, on Prince Max's advice. On October 27 Germany acknowledged the U.S. note.

Wilson now began to persuade the Allies to agree to an armistice and negotiations according to the U.S.–German correspondence. They agreed, with two reservations: they would not subscribe to the second of the Fourteen Points (on the freedom of the seas); and they wanted "compensation...for damage done to the civilian population...and their property by the aggression of Germany." Wilson's note of November 5 apprised the Germans of these reservations and stated that Foch would communicate armistice terms to Germany's accredited representatives. On November 8 a German delegation, led by Matthias Erzberger, arrived at Rethondes, in the Forest of Compiègne, where the Germans met face to face with Foch and his party and were informed of the Allies' peace terms.

German revolution: The last kaiser Civil unrest and revolution breaking out in the face of Germany's imminent defeat in ...(more)

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Meanwhile, revolution was shaking Germany. It began with a sailors' mutiny at Kiel on October 29 in reaction to the naval command's order for the High Seas Fleet to go out into the North Sea for a conclusive battle. Though the U-boat crews remained loyal, the mutiny of the surface-ship crews spread to other units of the fleet, developed into armed insurrection on November 3, and progressed to open revolution the next day. There were disturbances in Hamburg and in Bremen; "councils of soldiers and workers," like the Russian soviets, were formed in inland industrial centres; and in the night of November 7–8 a "democratic and socialist Republic of Bavaria" was proclaimed. The Social Democrats of the Reichstag withdrew their support from Prince Max's government in order to be free to contend against the Communists for the leadership of the revolution. While William II, at Spa, was still wondering whether he could abdicate his imperial German title but remain king of Prussia, Prince Max, in Berlin on November 9, on his own initiative, announced William's abdication of both titles. The Hohenzollern monarchy thus came to an end, joining those of the Habsburgs and the Romanovs. Prince Max handed his powers as chancellor over to Friedrich Ebert, a Majority Social Democrat, who formed a provisional government. A member of this government, Philipp Scheidemann, hastily proclaimed a republic. On November 10 William II took refuge in the neutral Netherlands, where on November 28 he signed his own abdication of his sovereign rights.

The Armistice

World War I: armistice Parisians celebrating the end of World War I, November 11, 1918.

The Allies' armistice terms presented in the railway carriage at Rethondes were stiff. Germany was required to evacuate not only Belgium, France, and Alsace-Lorraine but also all the rest of the left (west) bank of the Rhine, and it had to neutralize that river's right bank between the Netherlands and Switzerland. The German troops in East Africa were to surrender; the German armies in eastern Europe were to withdraw to the prewar German frontier; the treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest were to be annulled; and the Germans were to repatriate all prisoners of war and hand over to the Allies a large quantity of war materials, including 5,000 pieces of artillery, 25,000 machine guns, 1,700 aircraft, 5,000 locomotives, and 150,000 railroad cars. And meanwhile, the Allies' blockade of Germany was to continue.

Pleading the danger of Bolshevism in a nation on the verge of collapse, the German delegation obtained some mitigation of these terms: a suggestion that the blockade might be relaxed, a reduction in the quantity of armaments to be handed over, and permission for the German forces in eastern Europe to stay put for the time being. The Germans might have held out longer for further concessions if the fact of revolution on their home front had not been coupled with the imminence of a new blow from the west.

Though the Allied advance was continuing and seemed in some sectors even to be accelerating, the main German forces had managed to retreat ahead of it. The Germans' destruction of roads and railways along the routes of their evacuation made it impossible for

supplies to keep pace with the advancing Allied troops; a pause in the advance would occur while Allied communications were being repaired, and that would give the Germans a breathing space in which to rally their resistance. By November 11 the Allied advance on the northern sectors of the front had come more or less to a standstill on a line running from Pont-à-Mousson through Sedan, Mézières, and Mons to Ghent. Foch, however, now had a Franco-U.S. force of 28 divisions and 600 tanks in the south ready to strike through Metz into northeastern Lorraine. Since Foch's general offensive had absorbed the Germans' reserves, this new offensive would fall on their bared left flank and held the promise of outflanking their whole new line of defense (from Antwerp to the line of the Meuse) and of intercepting any German retreat. By this time the number of U.S. divisions in France had risen to 42. In addition, the British were about to bomb Berlin on a scale hitherto unattempted in air warfare.

World War I U.S. troops in French tanks in northeastern France, October 10, 1918.

Whether the Allies' projected final offensive, intended for November 14, would have achieved a breakthrough can never be known. At 5:00 AM on November 11, 1918, the Armistice document was signed in Foch's railway carriage at Rethondes. At 11:00 AM on the same day, World War I came to an end.

World War I armistice Allied and German officials at the signing of the armistice that ended the fighting in World War I,... ...(more)

The fact that Matthias Erzberger, who was a civilian politician rather than a soldier, headed the German armistice delegation became an integral part of the legend of the "stab in the back" (*Dolchstoss im Rücken*). This legend's theme was that the German Army was "undefeated in the field" (*unbesiegt im Felde*) and had been "stabbed in the back"—*i.e.,* had been denied support at the crucial moment by a weary and defeatist civilian population and their leaders. This theme was adopted soon after the war's end by Ludendorff himself and by other German generals who were unwilling to admit the hopelessness of Germany's military situation in November 1918 and who wanted to vindicate the honour of German arms. The "stab in the back" legend soon found its way into German historiography and was picked up by German right-wing political agitators who claimed that Allied propaganda in Germany in the last stages of the war had undermined civilian morale and that traitors among the politicians had been at hand ready to do the Allies' bidding by signing the Armistice. Adolf Hitler eventually became the foremost of these political agitators, branding Erzberger and the leaders of the Social Democrats as the "November criminals" and advocating militaristic and expansionist policies by which Germany could redeem its defeat in the war, gain vengeance upon its enemies, and become the preeminent power in Europe.

Killed, wounded, and missing

The casualties suffered by the participants in World War I dwarfed those of previous wars: some 8,500,000 soldiers died as a result of wounds and/or disease. The greatest number of casualties and wounds were inflicted by artillery, followed by small arms, and then by poison gas. The bayonet, which was relied on by the prewar French Army as the decisive weapon, actually produced few casualties. War was increasingly mechanized from 1914 and produced casualties even when nothing important was happening. On even a quiet day on the Western Front, many hundreds of Allied and German soldiers died. The heaviest loss of life for a single day occurred on July 1, 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, when the British Army suffered 57,470 casualties.

The last surviving veterans of World War I

- American serviceman Frank Buckles, who died in February 2011
- British-born Australian serviceman Claude Choules, who died in May 2011
- British servicewoman Florence Green, who died in February 2012

Sir Winston Churchill once described the battles of the Somme and Verdun, which were typical of trench warfare in their futile and indiscriminate slaughter, as being waged between double or triple walls of cannons fed by mountains of shells. In an open space surrounded by masses of these guns large numbers of infantry divisions collided. They fought in this dangerous position until battered into a state of uselessness. Then they were replaced by other divisions. So many men were lost in the process and shattered

beyond recognition that there is a French monument at Verdun to the 150,000 unlocated dead who are assumed to be buried in the vicinity.

This kind of war made it difficult to prepare accurate casualty lists. There were revolutions in four of the warring countries in 1918, and the attention of the new governments was shifted away from the grim problem of war losses. A completely accurate table of losses may never be compiled.

The best available estimates of World War I military casualties are assembled in the following tables.

Ask Anything Quick Summary

Battle of Verdun

World War I [1916]

Henri Bidou Britannica Editors History

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Ask Anything Quick Summary
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When did the Battle of Verdun take place?
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Battle of Verdun French soldiers resting away from the front line at the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

Battle of Verdun, (February 21–December 18, 1916), World War I engagement in which the French repulsed a major German offensive. It was one of the longest, bloodiest, and most-ferocious battles of the war; French casualties amounted to about 400,000, German ones to about 350,000. Some 300,000 were killed.

Brutal truths of the Battle of Verdun Overview of the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

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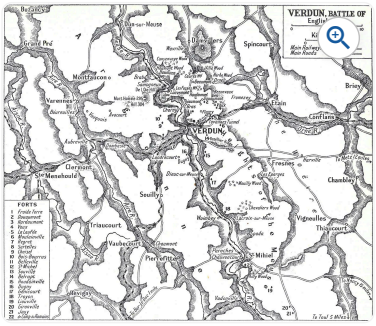
German Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn believed that the war would be won or lost in France, and he felt that a strategy of attrition was Germany's best hope of achieving its goals. In a letter to German Emperor William II in late 1915, he argued that Britain was the most formidable of the Allied powers, but he conceded that it could not be assaulted directly, save by submarine warfare, as the British sector of the Western Front did not lend itself to offensive operations (an assessment that would be proved correct at the First Battle of the Somme). In Falkenhayn's view, Britain's "real weapons" in the war were the French, Russian, and Italian armies. He regarded Russia as already paralyzed and Italy as unlikely to affect the outcome of the war, concluding, "Only France remains." Falkenhayn stated that a breakthrough en masse was unnecessary and that instead Germany should bleed France to death by choosing a point of attack "for the retention of which the French would be compelled to throw in every man they have."

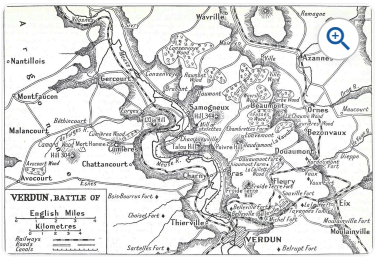


The fortress of Verdun with its surrounding fortifications along the Meuse River was selected because it threatened the main German communication lines, it represented a salient in the French defenses, and the loss of such a storied citadel would be an enormous blow to French morale. The keynote of the tactical plan was a continuous series of limited advances that would draw the French reserves into the mincing machine of the German artillery. Each of these advances was itself to be secured by an intense artillery bombardment, brief for surprise and making up for its short duration by the number of batteries and their rapidity of fire. By this means the objective would be taken and consolidated before the enemy could

move up its reserves for counterattack. Local command of the operation was given to Crown Prince William, the eldest son of William II.

Battle of Verdun: French forts Locations of French forts in the area around Verdun, 1916, map from the 13th edition of the...(more)

The initial German attack



Battle of Verdun: key sites Key sites of the Battle of Verdun, map from the 13th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1926).

As early as January 1916, French airmen had detected German preparations for the Verdun offensive, and on February 11, 1916, a French intelligence officer discovered a buildup of German troops on the right bank of the Meuse. As French commanders had been almost exclusively focused on their own offensive plans, their hasty efforts to bolster the defenses of Verdun were very nearly too late. Over the next 10 days, thousands of men and dozens of guns were moved to Verdun to oppose the expected German attack. Confronted with a massive logistical challenge—main rail lines to Verdun had been cut or were under constant barrage by German artillery—French officers organized a motorized supply chain on an unprecedented scale, transporting men and matériel to the front in a fleet of more than 3,000 trucks. The 37-mile (57-km) dirt road connecting the railhead at Bar-le-Duc to Verdun came to be known as La Voie Sacrée ("the Sacred Way") for its critical role in the French defense.

Battle of Verdun French soldiers receiving gas mask training during the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

At 7:15 AM on February 21, the Germans commenced a massive bombardment of a front some 25 miles (40 km) long, from the Bois d'Avocourt to Étain. At about 4:45 PM the first German infantry attack was launched, initially by teams of scouts who surveyed the damage done by the opening barrage. If French defenses had not been shattered in a given area, the scouts retired and directed additional shelling. Combat engineers then followed, ahead of the main body of the advance. German troops made significant gains by the end of the first day, occupying the Bois d'Haumont and penetrating the French lines. The following day the Germans capitalized on their gains, repelling a French counterattack. The village of Haumont was razed by artillery fire, and by February 23 the villages of Brabant-sur-Meuse, Wavrille, and Samogneux were in German hands. In three days the Germans had overrun the first line of French defenses, and both sides hastily reinforced their positions. Thousands of French troops, placed in untenable positions in open country, were almost immediately wiped from the field. On February 24 the Germans sought to advance from their position at Samogneux, but they were immobilized by French artillery. The rest of the German line swept through the second rank of French defenses, capturing Beaumont, the Bois des Fosses, and the Bois des Caurières and advancing on the key fort at Douaumont. That evening the French commander at Verdun, Gen. Joseph-Jacques-Césaire Joffre, the so-called "Victor of the Marne," was set aside in favour of Gen. Philippe Pétain.

Britannica Quiz
Pick Your Battles Quiz

Battle of Verdun French reinforcements being moved to the front during the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

Pétain brought a fresh army—the Second—to the fight, and on February 25 he was given the formidable task of holding the right bank of the Meuse. Initial plans had been made to mass French forces on the left bank so as to oppose a German crossing, but the French high command soon decreed that a new defensive line, stretching from the heights on the east bank of the Meuse to the village of Douaumont, should be held at all costs. As the French defense was reorganized, the Germans captured the undefended Fort Douaumont, arguably the most formidable of the strongpoints surrounding Verdun. Eight months would pass and much blood would be shed before the French could reclaim the fort. French resistance stiffened over subsequent days, however, and the German advance slowed. French fliers reclaimed command of the air over the battlefield, and Pétain deployed hundreds of artillery pieces to Verdun, linking many of the new batteries by telephone. On February 26–29 some 500,000 German troops assaulted Douaumont village, but the French defenses held.

The second phase of the battle

The Germans had failed to gain an immediate decision at Verdun, and they soon realized that the British army was preparing an attack on the Somme. For the next four months, they kept the Battle of Verdun going with furious tenacity in order to disorganize the attack being prepared by the Allies in Picardy. For its part, the French general staff was faced with the problem of holding on at Verdun without ceasing to prepare for the Somme, exhausting the Germans as much as possible in advance of the planned Allied summer offensive.

Verdun, France French troops passing though the ruins of Verdun, France, 1916.

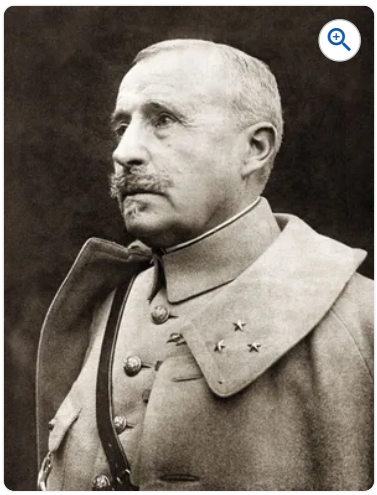
On March 4 the Germans captured Douaumont village. The town was razed during the battle, and the widespread presence of unexploded ordnance throughout the area ensured that it could not be rebuilt. The Germans expanded the scope of their attacks to the west bank of the Meuse, and on March 6 two reserve corps crossed the river at Brabant and occupied the Hill de 1'Oie. On March 10 the Germans captured the Bois de Cumières, clearing the way for an attack on one of the pillars of the main French line of defense, a hill known as Le Mort Homme ("the Dead Man"). Both sides suffered tens of thousands of casualties during the furious engagements, and on March 14 the Germans captured the lower crest of Le Morte Homme. The higher crest, known as Peak 295, could be held by neither side and was considered No Man's Land.

Battle of Verdun French civilians being evacuated from a village near Verdun, 1916.

The battle was now raging on both banks of the Meuse. On March 8 the Germans captured the defensive works surrounding Hardaumont on the right bank, and they spent the next 10 days engaging in a series of bloody but inconclusive attacks on the fort and village of Vaux. On the left bank the Germans overran the Bois d'Avocourt on March 20 as a prelude to an assault on the French strongpoint at Hill 304, but that attack failed to develop. The Germans brought up fresh troops, and on March 28 the battle began again on the left bank; on the right bank the Germans captured the village of Vaux on March 31. By April 8 the French had lost all that remained of their former front line on the left bank of the Meuse. The new front passed through Avocourt, the first slopes of Hill 304, the southern reverse of Le Mort Homme, and to the north of Cumières. On April 9 the crown prince ordered an attack on both banks on a scale not known since the opening offensive in February, but the gains were insignificant.

Battle of Verdun French troops camped behind the front lines at the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

The bloody stalemate continued through April as both armies rotated their commanding officers. Pétain was promoted to commander of Army Group Centre, and his former command was divided, with Robert-Georges Nivelle taking charge of French forces on the right bank and Henri Berthelot leading the defense on the left. The German command had also divided the field of battle into two sections, with Gen. Ewald von Lochow replacing Gen. Bruno von Mudra on the right bank; Gen. Max von Gallwitz commanded the left bank until he was replaced by Gen. Hermann von François in July. On May 8 the Germans captured the Bois Camard but were unable to parlay that advance into a successful assault on the French strongpoint at Hill 304. The village of Cumières fell in heavy fighting on May 24, but the German gains were partially reversed days later, owing to a French attack on Douaumont that immobilized German reinforcements destined for the left bank. As each army continued to seek the advantage at Verdun, preparations for the upcoming Somme offensive exerted pressure on both sides to push for a hasty and conclusive resolution to the battle.



Robert Nivelle

On June 1 the Germans attacked Vaux and Thiaumont, two strongpoints in the French line on the right bank. After days of back-and-forth combat, the Germans captured both positions on June 9, but they were unable to carry their attack through to the defensive works south of Thiaumont. Fighting on the left bank was largely inconclusive, but on June 15 the French reclaimed roughly a little more than a half mile (one kilometre) of trenches on Le Mort Homme. Such minor gains, which came at an enormous cost in lives, would typify the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front.

WESTERN FRONT EVENTS

Battle of Verdun
February 21, 1916 - December 18, 1916

First Battle of th...
July 1, 1916 - November 13, 1916

Second Battle o...
March 21, 1918 - April 5, 1918

Second Battle o...
July 15, 1918 - July 18, 1918

battles of the M...
September 26, 1918 - November 11, 1918

While the Germans retained the initiative at Verdun, their efforts were frustrated by events nearly 1,000 miles (1,600 km) away. On June 4 Russian Gen. Aleksey Brusilov launched a devastating offensive in Volhynia (now in Ukraine) that led to the capture of 200,000 Austro-Hungarian troops in the space of just three days. Forced to divert attention to the Eastern Front when victory at Verdun seemed imminent, the Germans renewed their attack on the right bank on June 21. The town of Fleury fell, as did the first line of trenches in front of Souville, but the offensive stalled at the French strongpoint at Froide Terre. By June 23 the situation had become so dire for the French that Pétain, as sector commander, advised relocating to the left bank if the Germans advanced farther; on June 27 he was ordered to hold the right bank at all costs.

The tide turns at Verdun

The preliminaries of the great Franco-British offensive on the Somme started on June 24 with a weeklong artillery barrage. The general Allied infantry assault began on July 1, and the British suffered nearly 60,000 casualties—with 20,000 killed—on the first day alone. On July 11 the Germans made yet another attack on Verdun, assaulting the line from Vaux to Souville with 12 regiments. The advance crumpled up on the slopes of Souville, and another German attack on August 1 failed. The French retook Thiaumont on August 3 and Fleury the following day, with the Germans regaining Thiaumont on August 8. Local fighting continued throughout the month, and the final significant German attack, on September 3, yielded no gains. With that the active period of the Battle of Verdun came to an end.

Battle of Verdun French soldiers recovering behind the front lines at the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

From February 21 to June 15, the French army had fielded 66 divisions at Verdun; by December 1916, roughly 75 percent of the French army had seen action on the Meuse. From February through July, the Germans had used 43 divisions. French guns at Verdun fired over 10,000,000 rounds with the field artillery, over 1,000,000 medium-calibre rounds, and 600,000 large-calibre rounds. At the conclusion of this enormous expenditure of blood and treasure, the lines were little changed from where they had been in early February.

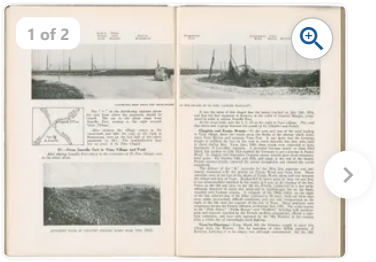
In September, Gen. Charles Mangin, who had held command of a section of the French defensive line from Fleury to the right bank of the Meuse from June 22, proposed a scheme to liberate the Verdun region. Nivelle approved, and that offensive was initiated on October 21 with an artillery barrage across a broad front. An infantry assault followed on October 24, with three divisions advancing behind a creeping artillery barrage. By that evening the French had retaken Douaumont along with 6,000 German prisoners, and by November 2 the fort at Vaux was once again in French hands. Mangin was a gifted strategist, but he was widely regarded as a spendthrift when it came to the lives of his men, and his commitment to offensive warfare at any cost earned him the nickname “the Butcher.”

In order to exploit his successes, Mangin planned to attack again on December 5 over a 6-mile (10-km) front on the right bank, with the intention of retaking in one blow the whole of the former second French line, which had been lost on February 24. Artillery preparation began on November 29 with a 750-gun barrage. Bad weather intervened, however, delaying the plan and allowing the Germans to learn of its existence, so the value of a surprise was lost. The Germans launched a violent offensive on December 6 in an attempt to preempt the French assault and captured Hill 304. Good weather returned on December 9, and Nivelle recommenced the preparatory barrage. French and German batteries engaged in artillery duels, and above the battlefield pilots contested for supremacy of the skies. At 10 AM on December 15, the attack was made. The German counterbarrage started two minutes too late,

and four French divisions assailed the German lines. By nightfall they had retaken the whole of Poivre Hill. The line of advance passed in front of Hill 378, stopping 65 feet (20 metres) south of the farm at Chambrettes, and then turned south across the Bois d'Hardaumont and the Bois la Vauche up to the defensive works at Bezonvaux. The French captured and destroyed 115 guns and took 9,000 prisoners. This engagement, which came to be known as the Battle of Louvemont, was completed on December 18 with the recapture of Chambrettes and the capture of over 11,000 German prisoners. This marked the end of the Battle of Verdun.

The aftermath

Over 10 months in 1916, the two armies at Verdun suffered over 700,000 casualties, including some 300,000 killed. The pastoral landscape surrounding the city had been permanently transformed, and nine villages—Beaumont, Bezonvaux, Cumières, Douaumont, Fleury, Haumont, Louvemont, Ornes, and Vaux—were entirely destroyed. After the war the villages were memorialized as having "died for France" and, although uninhabited, continued to be administered by mayors to preserve their existence as administrative entities. The unknown dead were commemorated at the Douaumont Ossuary, a monument completed in 1932 that contains the remains of 150,000 unidentified French and German soldiers.



Battle of Verdun: Michelin travel guide Pages from *The Battle of Verdun (1914–1918)*, 1920.

An area covering some 65 square miles (170 square km) on the Verdun ridge was declared a Zone Rouge ("Red Zone") because of the presence of unexploded ordnance, and development within it was prohibited. In the 21st century the French Interior Ministry estimated that over 10 million shells remained in the soil around Verdun, and bomb-clearing units continued to remove some 40 tons of unexploded munitions from the area annually. Especially dangerous were chemical rounds, which were largely indistinguishable from explosive shells; their contents retained their toxicity over time, and they were prone to leak when discovered and handled. It was estimated that at existing rates of clearance, *les demineurs* ("the deminers") would be uncovering and disposing of ordnance in the Verdun area for centuries to come.

Battle of Verdun Destroyed landscape at Verdun, 1916.

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5 Surprisingly Fascinating Forts in France

Know before you go.

Britannica Editors

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Ask Anything
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Forts can be dull, utilitarian structures, but here are four forts and one group of forts in France that are rich with significance and interest.

Battle of Verdun French reinforcements being moved to the front during the Battle of Verdun, 1916.

Earlier versions of the descriptions of these forts first appeared in 1001 Amazing Places You Must See Before You Die*, edited by Richard Cavendish (2016). Writers' names appear in parentheses.*

Citadel of Île Sainte-Marguerite (off Cannes)

Île Sainte-Marguerite lies half a mile (800 meters) from the Riviera town of Cannes. Until the 20th century, the fort on the island was home to many famous prisoners of the French state. The most well-known of these is the so-called man in the iron mask—a captive of King Louis XIV whose identity was an obsessively kept secret.

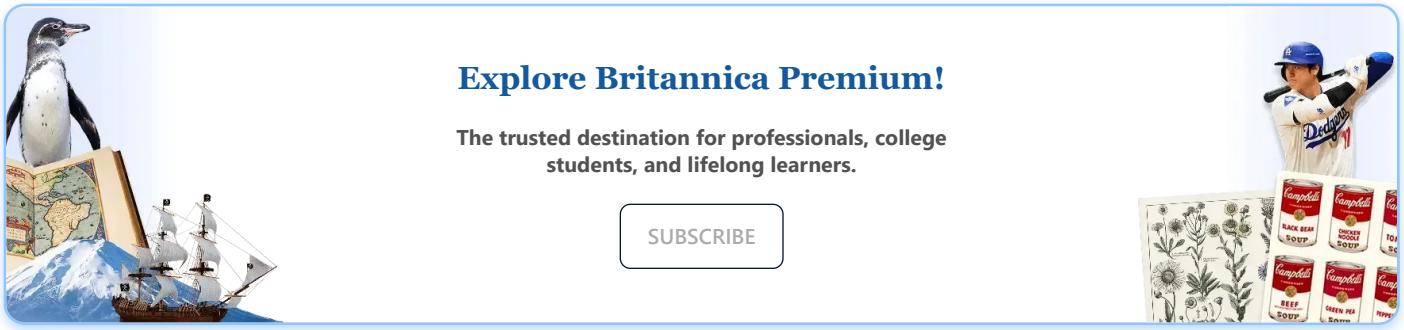
The fort was built in 1612, when ownership of the island passed to Charles de Lorraine, the duke of Chevreuse. By the end of the century, it was being used as a barracks and state prison. The prisoner known as the man in the iron mask arrived in May 1687. He stayed on the island until 1698, when he was moved to the Bastille in Paris; he died there in 1703. The prisoner was almost certainly Eustache Dauger, a valet, but the fact that his face was always covered led to rumors that his identity was more illustrious. The many theories include the rumor that he was an elder brother of Louis XIV.

The only man to escape from the island prison is Achille Bazaine, who surrendered to the Prussians during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). He was sentenced to 20 years of exile on the island in 1873, but he managed to escape to Italy after only a year. The Algerian rebel leader Abdelkader was also held on the island in the mid-19th century.

The fort is now home to a youth hostel and museum. Some of the original cells survive—including that of the man in the iron mask. (Jacob Field)

Cognac Otard (Cognac)

Cognac Otard is a distillery that evolved, through several iterations, from a fort built hundreds of years earlier. Cognac Otard was established in 1795 on the banks of the Charente River. (Cognac is a form of brandy made only from the white wines of the Cognac region.) The first building on this site was a fortress, built in 950 to defend the region against the Normans. In 1190 it became, by marriage, the property of the Plantagenets—the English kings. Château Cognac was rebuilt during the 15th century by the Valois family, and the future king Francis I of France was born here in 1494. In 1517 he extended and redeveloped the château in the Italian style.



Baron Jean Otard was born near Cognac in 1773; he was the great grandson of James Otard of Scotland, who, loyal to the Stuart king James II, had joined him in exile in France. In 1793 Baron Otard narrowly avoided execution in the French Revolution and escaped to England. Returning in 1795, he bought Château Cognac and founded the Otard distillery. The 10-foot- (3-meter-) thick walls of the vaulted cellars were ideal for aging cognac, but the Renaissance chapel was of little use to the business and was demolished. (Elizabeth Horne)

Fort National (St. Malo)

With its ramparts, forts, towers, and castle, St. Malo in Brittany was one of France's most heavily defended ports. The Fort National stands out among all the military emplacements, partly because it was designed by Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, France's greatest military engineer, but also because it is one of the few historic buildings to have survived relatively intact.

The Fort National was completed in 1689 on a tiny rocky island close to the shore. It can be reached by foot at low tide, but it is otherwise cut off from the beach. It was built on the orders of Louis XIV and designed by Vauban. The work was carried out by Siméon Garengeau, with granite imported from the nearby islands of Chausey. The decision to build a fort was understandable. St. Malo was a well-known haven for privateers (semilegal pirates) and, as such, was often targeted by the victims of their activities. In 1817 the privateer Robert Surcouf fought a notorious duel outside the walls of the fort, killing 11 Prussian officers and leaving a 12th to tell the tale.

St. Malo was heavily bombed in World War II, but its darkest hour came in August 1944 when 380 citizens were imprisoned in the fort by German soldiers. They were left without food for six days while much of the town was destroyed, and 18 of the prisoners

died. Today the fort is a popular tourist site. (Iain Zaczek)

Château Grimaldi / Musée Picasso (Antibes)

Château Grimaldi, a substantial fortress, was built in the 12th century. It was raised on the foundations of the acropolis (high defense point) in what was then the Greek town of Antipolis. It later became the residence of the bishops of Antibes. In 1383 Luc and Marc Grimaldi from Monaco—crossbowmen in the army of Queen Jeanne of Navarre—were given the fortress and the land around it as a private kingdom. It remained in the Grimaldi family until 1608, when Henry IV bought the land, town, and port of Antibes, and the estate became part of France.

The fort has had many uses over the centuries. It has been home to the king's governor, a town hall, and a barracks. In 1925, having become somewhat neglected, Château Grimaldi was recognized as a rich archeological site and was bought by Antibes Council. Renamed Grimaldi Museum, it was classified as a historic monument in 1928.

In 1945 Pablo Picasso visited the museum to view an exhibition of children's paintings. He was asked by the curator for "a little drawing for the museum." Picasso was attracted to the place and was invited to use part of the museum as a studio. He produced a great deal of work there between September and November 1946, often using unusual materials such as house paint, fiber cement, reused wood, and plates. Picasso left these works to the town of Antibes, including *La Joie de Vivre*, *Satyr*, *Sea Urchins*, and *The Goat*. These artworks formed the basis for the development of the fortress into the Picasso Museum. (Elizabeth Horne)

Verdun Forts Circuit (Verdun)

If, as Wilfred Owen wrote, World War I exposed as a lie the traditional view that it is a "sweet and honorable thing to die for your country," the Battle of Verdun marked the sourest and most dishonorable point in the war. The battle, which began in February 1916 and lasted until December, resulted in some 300,000 deaths.

Before World War I, Verdun, in northeastern France, was the strongest point in the country, surrounded by a string of mighty forts. The city was a natural target for the Kaiser's armies. Knowing that the French would do all they could to defend their historic forts, the Germans poured hundreds of thousands of men into their attack. From February to July 1916, the French were pushed back in some of the bloodiest fighting the war was to see. The other Allies, realizing the trouble the French were in, attacked at the Somme, partly to take German troops away from Verdun. From then on, the German forces were stretched, and the French general Philippe Pétain and his men were able to recapture their forts from the Germans.

Douaumont and Vaux, two of the main forts, are preserved and accessible to visitors, as are tunnels and galleries of the underground citadel. Numerous French and German cemeteries and memorials are on the Verdun battlefield. The Douaumont Ossuary contains the remains of many thousands of soldiers. (Oscar Rickett)

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

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